# Prima Donna

A NOVEL BY

NANCY FREEDMAN

Author of MRS. MIKE and THE IMMORTALS

$10.95

"She heard music. Music from her half-forgotten life. Music played by her mother. Benka, it was long-ago Benka who listened, who stole up the church steps, pushed open the carved double doors and reentered her childhood. . . . She began to sing. . . . She recognized the cantata in her throat before her brain named it, Wachet Auf! "Sleepers, Wake!". . . . Her voice strengthened, joining the flood of sound. . . . With infinite compassion the music called. She approached the organist . . . mounted the stairs until she stood beside him and the magnificent pipe organ. . . . She was the sleeper who woke."

From

# PRIMA DONNA

## NANCY FREEDMAN

This novel enters the life and heart of an incomparable opera star and takes us backstage to a turbulent, colorful world behind the velvet curtains—a world seldom seen by its avid audience. Nancy Freedman's heroine is Benedickta Roland, one of the most spellbinding singers ever to electrify the operatic stage.

Freedman begins Benedickta's compelling story with the child—capricious, willful and gifted—able to cope with her mother's suicide and her father's abandonment only through the

(continued on back flap)

William Morrow & Company, Inc.

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# PRIMA DONNA

*Other books by Nancy Freedman*

Mrs. Mike

Joshua Son of None

The Immortals

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a novel

by

Nancy Freedman

William Morrow and Company, Inc.
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For Deborah with admiration

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*God guard me from those thoughts men think*
*In the mind alone.*
*He that sings a lasting song*
*Thinks in a marrowbone.*

—William Butler Yeats

She had been dying in short bursts for some time. Life had become a slow dying with no illness attached to it. When she couldn't sleep, which was most of the time, she flicked on the reel-to-reel. Her voice flowed over her. Norma, the priestess who worshiped trees and sacrificed people. . . . She lay with eyes closed, remembering that November, the city of Venice and her opening night. The role wasn't hers, not completely—not until she communed with those massive menhirs, moving from strength to strength.

Suddenly Benedickta was alert, listening expectantly to the tape; there it was, the perfect top C in *"ah trema."* What was the name of the singer who had lost her place after the A? She had somehow held her own C until the line was picked up.

Benedickta drowsed until the second act duet, "Deh! con te," spinning with marvelous control. She listened to "Mira, o Norma," anticipating her B flat. A flash of notes, then the beautiful effect on the quasi-cadenza before Clotilda's entrance, "In mia mano." *Yes, I raised the dagger.* Her lips formed the words in Italian. In mental duet she joined her own world-renowned soprano.

"Make it a glory finish," he used to say to her. She had, her voice soaring to a reverberating crescendo. Abruptly she switched off the machine, preferring the sudden stillness, there was so much to be still about. She watched morning define the shape of the world.

Had she slept? She didn't know. It was an endurance test with the hours of night. She had won once more. Although she didn't know if the battle was worth fighting any longer. Like Minerva's owl, her thoughts after dark flew in one direction. For the first time the im-

pulse carried into day. Nietzsche said: "The thought of suicide is a powerful comfort." A fellow insomniac, he wrote: "It helps get one through many a dreadful night."

She got up and went into the bathroom. When she came back to bed, the tray with orange juice, toast and coffee was there. She liked breakfast. Not only did it signal the end of an interminable night, she actually looked forward to it. She enjoyed the smell of coffee, the refreshing sip of juice and the reassuring munch of toast. Breakfast was a small constancy on which to peg her day.

She never rang for Emma before her second cup of coffee. As she poured it, she selected another tape, *Le Nozze di Figaro*. She settled back. How deliciously Mozart entangled and captured you. The elegance, the style, the flow of musical forms blending, revealing. That was Mozart's genius. Even in the farcical buffo settings, a human cry rang out.

. . . "You'll never be a great artist until you acquire discipline," her mother said to her. She must have been seven. Her mother didn't see the curtains blazing with sun, hear the neighbor children at their games, smell the wind as it tossed leaves and rattled things loose. Her mother stood between her and tantalizing freedom. Her mother believed she could do bigger and greater and more wonderful things. Her mother believed so hard that she wound up doing them.

From the beginning she possessed an acute, precise hearing. As soon as she could make herself understood, she asked her mother to refrain from the bedtime lullaby. Alexandra, a concert pianist, was surprisingly pleased. She told her husband their daughter had perfect pitch.

Benedickta hadn't liked the piano. It forced music from her head where it belonged, into the fingers. It seemed perverse that music should move downward to inhabit the fingertips. Even then her head was full of sounds and when she opened her mouth, they came out naturally.

The piano was a ball and chain. Outside a day called. *How they used to call.*

Her mother had an enormous repertoire of stories about her. According to one: as an infant she was such a tyrant that it was Alexandra who climbed into the playpen to get away from the child. Of course her mother's stories were rarely consistent—a variation of the playpen was as a place to keep valuables because it was the one spot the baby refused to go. Her mother was fond of relating the episode

of the forty dolls. Why any child should have forty dolls was a mystery now she thought of it, but apparently she possessed that many. She did not recall this part directly, but through her mother's voice, the timbre clear in her head after more than thirty years.

"By the time she was five, my daughter's first task every day was to line all the dolls against the wall and demand of each in turn that they sit. She pushed on their heads to accomplish this. Thirty-nine dolls obeyed. But the last, she always set it up last, was fashioned in a single piece. It was, as we both knew, incapable of bending, let alone sitting. Nevertheless she tapped it expectantly on the head and when it refused to do more than fall over sideways, that was her cue. What a performance she put on! I don't think you could call it crying— screaming, sobbing, utter and total hysterics, right on time by the clock."

She lacked discipline then. Later she acquired it. The woman of the present smiled tolerantly at the child of the past. She had resented her mother because she was right, and for naming her Benedickta. Mark called her Benka. She didn't mind that. But *Benedickta* proved her mother's flair for the grandiose. Imagine looking at a wrinkled newborn and thinking . . . *Benedickta.*

Discipline split her down the middle. Discipline in one's work was an absolute, a complete commitment. She stared into the courtyard past the dazzling whitewashed wall, through the Moorish arch to the ocean. The water was somber this morning, or was it noon? Slate gray, it fomented a constant rhythmic movement from its depths. There was no discipline there, but a seething of winds, currents and tides. If she could scream as she had as a thwarted five-year-old, perhaps she could drive out the evil genii bottled in her. Did devil masks, rattles, drums and high-pitched keening exorcise demons? If only she could step to the window, throw wide the casement and let the accumulated agony pour from her throat. What key would she start off in? Would she trill it, rising to a resplendent E flat in alt?

For a moment the old power stirred. She was bemused, confusing the sounds from the tape with *now*. The music rained melodic fragments which she absorbed like ions from the atmosphere. With an impatient gesture, tossing her head like the princess Turandot, she stopped the machine again. This time midphrase, because that's the way it had happened—as suddenly as that, silence jammed her throat.

She had lost everything. She glanced around the room with grim

satisfaction: it was swept clear of pictures, mementos. She disdained them. She knew what her life had been. Why parade it? She knew whom she had loved. Why frame his face? It was unthinkable that he be held static behind glass.

And Mark—no picture was needed there either—so like her that a mirror brought him before her. There was only one in the room, a small oval framed in Mexican silver. She put aside the breakfast tray and got up. She could hear her bath being run.

She walked to the oval mirror and looked without sympathy at the woman who stared back, remote, distant. The eyes piercingly dark, the taut face stretched over high cheekbones. She peered closely at the frown line and the fine tracery that came with being close to forty. Mark had never been forty. He had never been twenty.

In looking at herself she always saw her brother. The spacing between the eyes, that was it. And the nose, somewhat long with narrow patrician nostrils. When she was angry they flared, pulsing in and out as his used to. She looked a moment longer at the handsome woman in the glass, then turned away. Sometimes she woke feeling ridiculously young and vigorous. At other times her first thought was, *The voice is gone.*

Trying not to remember took a great deal of her time. Nevertheless she had wakened remembering her mother. Had it come full cycle then? She glanced at her appointment book picked up that first winter in Venice; it had the typical gilt scroll pressed into a cloth-and-leather binding. This evening *La Gioconda* was being done in concert at the Music Center. She must experience Gioconda once more, if only from her box. The Ponchielli strains were immediately in her head. The role was second breath to her. That terrible song, "Suicidio! . . . in questi fieri momenti . . ."

But that way? It was too brutal. She made the decision not to attend the performance but to put on her own recording. . . . She let her robe fall to the floor, Emma would pick it up later, and stepped into the tub. She settled back, inhaling the scented oils, and lifting a shapely leg, scrutinized it. She had somewhere in the crevices of her mind homed in on tonight.

Not Gioconda—she must look for another role to give her strength. Tosca? But she always returned to Norma. She began to hum, letting the music swell in the passages of her head.

Emma paused to listen to the croaking sound. It had been a long

time since there was any sound whatever.

Benedickta, on her side of the door, reached forward, letting more hot water into the tub. The Romans frequently accomplished their suicides in the bath, where the chill of death could be offset by heated water. But she didn't like the thought of slipping under.

No, not the bath. To eradicate the unpleasant impression, she poured in liquid bubbles which foamed around her. The pretty things stuck together, prismatic, reflecting miniature rainbows, popping for no reason. They reminded her of the forty dolls, of their ultimate fate.

She was an impossible child, everyone said so. And she did not think that throughout her life there had been much improvement. She had always had more trouble with herself than any person she knew. Still, she thought it unnecessary for Mark to put a sign on his door KEEP OUT: THIS MEANS YOU BENKA. Underneath was another sign that read JKKE FORSTYRRES. When asked what this meant, he replied, "It means keep out in Swedish."

Why Swedish? There weren't any Swedes in the house. The deterrent to entering Mark's room was a high pile of books precariously balanced on the transom and attached by a thread, so that if the door was opened in the normal manner, all the books fell on your head.

Mark himself gained access to his den by slipping in sideways. When Benka imitated this technique, her usually calm and logical brother went berserk. Without a word he invaded her room. She followed to see what was up.

Mark took his time. He surveyed and evaluated her possessions. He took in the forty dolls lined against the wall. At the end of his assessment, his eyes returned to them. They were his choice. One by one he picked them up and threw them against the floor, smashing them. The cloth dolls had their heads twisted off, their stuffing pulled out and scattered. It took almost an hour to demolish the entire collection.

Benka stood mute throughout, watching. When the last doll succumbed, Mark turned and looked at her. He was panting with fury and exertion and his nostrils pulsed. She went over to him and touched him with a tentative finger to make sure it was a flesh-and-blood Mark who had done this thing. Then she kissed him.

Mark's anger evaporated. He laughed. They were Scotch twins,

she was born on his birthday two years later. He swung her off her feet onto his back and galloped wildly through the rooms of the apartment.

Benedickta Roland banished the memory and placed her feet carefully on the rubberized bathmat. She didn't want an accident or any such foolishness now. Doing things right was a fetish with her. She liked precision. Her life and art were founded on it.

Not her life. Her life had been a consortium of disaster. Only in art had she followed the certainty of a shafting star. She dried inside a heavy monogrammed towel and rubbed her face with creams labeled Moisturizer -4 and Protein MC. Dabbing everything with a Kleenex, she prepared for the day.

The last day, so surprisingly like other days. No blue gelatin across the color wheel to darken the scene. No spotlight either. She had died onstage a thousand times in graceful despairing coloratura flutings or wild staccato grief, reaching her famous top E flat and diminuendoing with complete control.

But of course that wasn't the way of it at all. You had your usual breakfast and enjoyed it, took your bath, made your toilette and . . . here she paused, aware of the buffing machine below, waxing and polishing the floor planks. The sound clawed at her nerves. She decided to spend the morning in the garden.

She spoke at the bottom of the stairs without pausing. "Good morning, Emma," and flinched at the way it came out.

The gaunt woman replied, her face undergoing a myriad of small changes to accommodate the smile, "Good morning."

When they questioned her, she would say, "She seemed as usual." And she was as usual. Except for a heightened awareness of things past. Her childhood especially, hers and Mark's, seemed to wrap her. An early butterfly triggered memory. Mark in Central Park, enclosing a bee in his sweaty hand, transporting it to more abundant flowers. He was never stung.

She leaned back in the deck chair. As so often happens at the beach, the fog lifted, the sun broke through, and the sea danced in coruscating planes of brilliant light.

She and Mark were in some odd manner extensions of each other. Mark told her once she possessed a kind of energy that refused to stay in her own skin. Mark's nature was a single-minded dispassionate pursuit of himself. It was a long time before she was aware of the dark anguish which permeated and at times dominated him. It

was as though he knew. Perhaps he did. When you look long into the abyss, the abyss looks into you. That's what had happened.

What was Nothingness? She read Sartre and still didn't know, and neither did he. She had decided to do it in bed with the electric blanket on 5.

Mark had been more quiet than usual, in an introspective quest for reasons. There seemed to be no reasons. Noise burst over the house, harsh tones reverberated painfully. A door slammed.

Alexandra Roland resorted to the piano, a nine-foot concert Baldwin. She played masterfully but wastefully, attempting to batter and wound the piano. She used her wonderful skill with disregard, as one would pick up a shovel and throw dirt by the scoopful.

Benka hid behind the drapes. Her mother stopped playing. The silence was of a special kind, jangling and discordant, ready to erupt. Her mother struck the keys again, not music but raging. Benka held her breath, praying for silence, even that terrible silence. It came after a chord which resolved nothing, which made everything more disturbing than before.

Her father had left. That had been the door slam. Mother continued to sit at the piano. Benka crept around the massive furniture for a view of her face.

Benka saw what it was that frightened her. It wasn't her mother's face at all. It was her fingers, which continued to run over the keyboard in rapid arpeggios, only they avoided contact with the keys, hovering a scant space above them. Alexandra Roland played in the air. But you had only to study her face as her daughter did, to know she heard each note.

Benka scurried away to tell Mark. Mark seemed to know all about it. "Mother's upset."

"Why is she upset?"

"Shut up, Benka."

"I will if you tell me why she's upset."

"Okay, okay. There's going to be a divorce."

The black centers of her eyes swallowed the narrow brown rims. "What's a divorce?"

"It's where you don't want people anymore, then you get a divorce."

Benka nodded as though she understood, but she didn't. She went into her own room, put on her muffler, hat, coat, gloves, and took the elevator to the lobby. She crossed Central Park West against the light with a wave of other pedestrians and sat on a bench. The playground was behind her. But its iron bars were uninviting today. The children looked like animals performing in a zoo, up-the-slide-down-the-slide. How stupid, when people were getting divorced. She hadn't known that grown-up fighting was more serious than her own tantrums. But now she curled into a small ball on the slatted bench and picked out words. "Impossible. Spoiled. A spoiled brat." It was a familiar description. It failed to move her. It was usually followed by "Is a man never to have peace in his own house?" That was Daddy after he'd taken off his overcoat. She loved the overcoat, big, bulky, a tweed with the smell of outdoors, sometimes a trace of snow on the collar. It smelled of tobacco and it smelled of her father. When he took it off it was as though he had peeled himself. She didn't like him as well then. When he called her to come sit on his lap, she wouldn't. He blew smoke rings, then she'd come.

She was still hunched on the bench when Mark found her. "Why did you run away?" he asked.

She answered crossly, "If I ran away how come I'm right here across the street?"

The logic of this did not reach Mark. "Father's home. He's mad at you. He says you've run away." Benka allowed herself to be led back but she refused to answer the ridiculous charge.

Father, swelling with anger, demanded, "Benedickta, why did you run away?"

She didn't answer because she finally understood—the fighting, the slamming of doors weren't important.

It had to do with music. Everything in her mother's life was music. When she threw the word "career" across the room like a ball no one wanted to catch, Benka knew what that meant. It meant Father thought Mother should be happy sitting in the living room playing the piano. He was always telling her how much the piano

cost. Even Benka knew the exact amount, four thousand six hundred and fifty seven dollars. Mother would reply, "Once an accountant, always an accountant. Life is more than profit-and-loss statements."

Then Father: "I'm not ashamed of my job, it puts bread on the table."

"You can't cage me," Mother would shriek, her voice tight with a misery Benka didn't know about. That was one reason Benka screamed and stamped her feet and battered at people. She was afraid of things whose names she didn't know. *Divorce*, she had found out about that. But what about the others? *Career*, her mother said over and over. "Without my music, I'm stifling."

"I don't know what you want. I bought you the best instrument money can buy. I'll be paying on it the next ten years."

Her mother spat a word. Benka took the word to Mark. Mark shook his head.

"Well?" she demanded.

"It's a dirty word," he said.

"Does Mother know lots of dirty words?"

"Yep."

"Does Father?"

"I suppose so."

She left Mark and went into her room to think. The dirty word occupied her. She wondered what it meant. She decided it meant MUSIC, because that was the word hurled most frequently between her parents. That was odd. Music was a place you walked in while people thought you were just sitting. But in her home it was uttered in harsh, unfriendly tones. It was because of that word, Benka thought, that they went on a ship.

One suitcase was heavy with Alexandra's sheet music. Benka watched as it was shoved under the bunks with the rest of the luggage. She liked the cabin. Everything had different names, bunks for beds, portholes for windows. And when she touched a wall it vibrated with the working of great engines pounding away beneath them.

"You mustn't worry, my darlings," Mother said. "I made my way before, I'll do it again."

They smiled and avoided looking at each other.

"I have more maturity to bring to my work now."

The children nodded.

". . . And a letter to a very big agent, a booking agent."

"Let's play ticktacktoe," Benka suggested.

London was not like New York. Mother said it would be, but it wasn't. In the first place, rooms were *let*, not rented. And the toilet paper was awful. In their street the buildings were squeezed in so close they seemed to hold each other up. The flat they moved into was in Goulton Road, in an area known as Hackney. "These old places have larger rooms," their mother said.

The first week was spent settling in, which meant selecting the right piano. It was a rental with option to buy. There was a search for a Baldwin, but none was to be had. The Bechstein couldn't come up the stairs because of the turn at the landing.

Neighbors appeared to advise the movers. Eventually the Bechstein, disguised by padding and secured with ropes, was hoisted through the air to the window and guided in. All this to Alexandra's unremitting cries: "Don't let it hit the side of the building. Don't scratch it. If it is jarred, the tone will be ruined."

When the perilous ascent was accomplished and the piano dollied to its intended spot in the flat, an interior wall where no dampness could corrode the strings, Alexandra collapsed.

Benka approached the dark mahogany and played an A. "It's sharp," she announced.

Alexandra gathered courage to try it herself. "It sounds like a wounded buffalo."

"It will be all right," Mark said. "All you have to do is get it tuned."

"How can I do that? It cost an entire month's allotment just to move it here. We're poor, children, you've got to understand that." With sudden resolution she added, "Never mind, I'll tune it myself."

"We're poor" was a refrain they heard often. But except for the constant verbal admonition, they lived as they had always done.

Mother was radiant. Her agent arranged a concert and she was at the piano all day, taking a two-hour break at teatime. Being Americans, they went sight-seeing then. The first place Benka wanted to go was London Bridge. Goulton Road was uneven with bricks set every which way, but it brought them to an ordinary street from which they took the Tube. A refrain was going round in Benka's head: *Lock her up, lock her up, my fair lady.* She could feel herself passing under Mark's arm, being tossed back and forth.

When they finally emerged from the underground, the light of day replacing that of neon tubes, they had to take a bus because Mother had got things muddled. Eventually, however, she was able to say, "Look, children, there it is—London Bridge."

Benka looked where her mother pointed and proclaimed in a loud and arrogant voice, "That is not London Bridge."

"Of course it's London Bridge," her mother said.

"It's not."

"Benedickta, will you please not contradict. Right here"—she pointed to a small bronze plaque—"it says London Bridge."

Benka took in the reality of dingy bricks and small unimposing span. She could not accept it as the London Bridge of her games. Still, there was the plaque, her mother's proof. She glared at the incised print, then brightened as the solution flashed on her. "This is *a* London bridge," she conceded, "but it's not *the* London Bridge."

Mark laughed. Her mother shrugged. "Really, Benka, you're impossible."

While no one argued that, opinions differed as to the reason. The permissive upbringing which worked so well with Mark unleashed in her a chaotic vitality. There seemed to be no particular continuity about her. From one moment to the next she might have been a different child. There was an elusive quicksilver element that disconcerted her family. No one really agreed on anything concerning her, not even what she looked like.

She was gypsy-dark like her mother, with long eyes that pretended not to know who you were. Alexandra, unable to analyze the look, would say irritably, "What's the matter with you, Benedickta?"

Mark never asked that question. He understood her. In a way, he had invented her. Her entire information as to the world was filtered through her brother. He told her how things were. She never questioned how Mark knew. Grown-ups were always saying about him, "He is old beyond his years." Or "He was born old." And although Benka made it a point to fight with him every day so he wouldn't get conceited, he was the main content of her life. His principal fault was having secrets. He was full of secrets. But he was the only one who knew Benka, the only one who knew who they were. "Remember who you are." He'd say that to her so she could find her way out of the bad places.

Benka had flashes of memory about Mark. He used to come and

look at her. That was when she was in her crib, too young even to talk. He would come into the room and look hard into her face as though impressing something of importance on her. He never smiled on these occasions and never said anything. He was sensible even then, he waited until they could have conversations.

In one early conversation he explained to her that boys didn't as a rule interest themselves in sisters. But theirs was a special case. Benka was born on his birthday. The odds of that happening were just about zero. It was such an unusual circumstance that it made them deferred twins. Their first game, the first she could remember, was built around her getting born. At the back of Mark's walk-in closet was a cedar chest which held a mound of winter clothes, snowsuits, caps, mufflers. It was on this assorted heap that Benka would lie down. She was completely still while Mark issued bulletins on how close she was to her birth. In that time of waiting in the dark with closed eyes, she could not imagine light, or what would be when her eyes opened.

She did imagine sounds, the music her mother played on the piano. And she associated different parts of the music with the people she knew. Mother was a trilled sequence, beautiful and perfect. Father, a return bar that repeated, and Mark a chord with layered possibilities, a chord sandwiched with secrets. She lay and listened to them all. When it was time to be born Mark lifted her up. They both marveled at the miracle of it.

She was seven when they moved to London. Benka never felt strange in a strange place. She liked new things, and enough of her old life followed, like the button box, so she felt at home. She loved her mother's buttons, dainty cloth-covered ones with a single loop behind, others of brass that looked like medals; all the variegated colors, sizes and textures delighted her. She could be absorbed for hours matching them. Eight of one kind of button was the most she had gathered. Mark was not interested in buttons, he liked books. Another thing that followed her were his stories: All-Wise Helen, and Baba Yaga, who lived in a house on stilts and tended geese. The stories always ended, "The morning is wiser than the night."

Of course Mark wasn't the only one to have secrets. Her secret followed her to London, and when the music was in her head, she closed Mark out. There was no way to tell about or share what was happening. A great mass of sound moved around forming patterns

like arches and vaults. You walked between and among them because you had built them. She was sorry no one else knew, but glad too.

At first London put their mother in a good frame of mind. The children were entered in school. They had their birthday, turning eight and ten. But Alexandra's original booking engagement faded away, the promised concert never came about. She told them, "You can't be away as long as I have and take up where you left off." She also blamed the times. Hitler was putting pressure on Austria. People came out of the newsreels looking frightened. The world could explode at any moment. Alexandra told them, "This is when we need music most. Music is the highest form of civilization, and civilization is in peril." During these months she spent hours at the piano. Then she would dress carefully and go out, telling Mark what tins to open in case she wasn't back by dinner. Mark scoffed at packaged foods. He was reading a book on survival which told how to identify edible berries. Mark was keen on the idea. "You can fry slugs," he told Benka. "They are high in protein and just as nutritious as other meat. Of course, the problem," he added thoughtfully, "is to catch enough of them."

How did Mark know these things? Benka supposed it came from being two years older.

Now it was Mother and Mark who argued about money. They also discussed the *Anschluss* in heated tones and whether there would be war. Benka wanted to ask Mark the meaning of *Anschluss*, but it sounded as ominous as *divorce*, so she complained about school and how boring it was. The only good thing that happened in all these long, rainy, sore-throat weeks was Tabby.

Tabby was a battered yellow tom, with an enormous head that reminded her of the Cheshire cat in *Alice*. He showed up regularly and the children considered him theirs, although Mother maintained they were only one stop on his daily rounds. Benka spied him squeezed against the kitchen window and ran to let him in. Tabby lapped his milk but was in no mood to be cuddled. "Let's color." Benka was already getting out the crayon box that had made the journey with them. She had been promised new crayons if she would leave these behind, but she wouldn't. She liked this set. She had broken most of the crayons herself and remembered many of the drawings on which they gave way. They lay in three or four

disjointed pieces, many just rounded nubs. She grabbed one of these and scoured her drawing pad industriously.

Alexandra came in the door to hear her say, "My favorite color is the color of Daddy." Alexandra caught her breath sharply. Mark looked up at her and away. They had been in England almost a year and by tacit agreement Daddy was a subject none of them mentioned. Alexandra stooped down to Benka. "What made you say that?" she asked her daughter.

Benka didn't consider that a question one had to answer. She continued scrubbing at the page. Alexandra straightened, took off her hat and coat and hung them on the coatrack in the hall. Before coming here, Benka had never seen a coatrack. "Darling," her mother said, "do you miss Daddy?"

"Why should I miss him"—Benka didn't bother to look up—"when I hate him."

Her mother was appalled. "But you mustn't. You mustn't hate your father."

"Well, I do."

"But why, baby, why should you hate him?"

"Because he isn't here."

Her mother hugged her, sudden tears on her face. "Would you like to go back home? What about you, Mark? Would you?"

Mark was silent.

"Perhaps your father has learned his lesson," she said somewhat grimly.

"What about your career?" Mark asked.

"Oh. Well, it's difficult getting started again. The public forgets. It's a blow to your confidence. And it's the confidence that gives an edge, puts that added brilliance on a note, just confidence." She laughed with nervous excitability and changed the subject. "What have my two been up to?"

The children didn't know how to reply, so Alexandra looked at Benka's drawing for a clue. "That's nice."

"You're holding it upside down," Benka told her. Alexandra sighed. Why did her conversation with the child invariably go askew?

Benka went outside to walk on the cement slope that bordered the steps to their flat. Careful balancing, one foot before the other, had become ritual. She did it solemnly, for it called up a lot of

things into her mind in such a way that she didn't have to think about them. When she first went to school here, Mother said after a while she would like it. Well, it was a while. She and Mark had each been promoted to a new form, and she still didn't like it. She didn't even like the long-stretching vacation ahead.

That night their mother wrote the letter. She had written letters to New York for the last few months, but hadn't posted them. This she took to the letter box herself. When she came back she seemed happy in the way Mark and Benka were. They were like three children. Benka didn't have her piano lesson prepared and Mother only laughed. "You could bluff anyone but me, Benedickta. The rhythm you have perfectly because you are a natural musician, and you strike cleanly, but your fingering . . . what have you to say about that? You're doing double-jointed contortions to get back to middle C."

This time they both laughed, which they never did at the piano. Mark looked up from his book, keeping his place with his fingers, and smiled. It was one of Benka's pretty days when she looked like Mother.

"Come on." Mother urged Mark out of his chair. "I'm going to teach you both a folk dance. Take my hands."

Alexandra Roland decided she had left unsaid most of the things she needed and wanted to say to her husband. She didn't think of him as her ex-husband. After all, what validity had a scrap of paper? So the first letter was followed by a torrent of pages as it took only a few words in her large handwriting to fill an entire sheet. In the morning the second letter was posted and the trunk ordered up from the basement.

"I had a dream," Benka said at breakfast, "all on one note—A."

Her mother found that amusing.

"You didn't dream it," Benka said sulkily. "I did, and it was awful."

Her mother laughed out loud and hugged her. "Try to be a good girl, Benedickta. We'll be going home soon."

Mark watched, almost clinically observant. "What about the divorce?"

Their mother was startled. She didn't answer at once. "The divorce. Yes, well, you see it really depends on how people feel about each other. A divorce is just a legal procedure. It can't wipe out the years together. Besides, there's you children. You need a father."

"What do we need him *for*?" Benka asked.

"I know you love your father, Benedickta. I've been very selfish, I know how you miss him."

Benka scraped her cereal bowl energetically, not to polish off the oatmeal, but to remove it from her spoon. "I miss his coat," she said finally.

"You miss *him*," her mother decided for her. She was giving an important audition that afternoon. She warmed up at the piano, flexed her fingers a final time and put on her suit, the one she wore when she played for people. "Wish me luck." She bent and kissed them. Mark hated being kissed. "If they can't schedule an engagement for Alexandra Roland within the next few weeks, they will have missed their chance."

"We're really going home, then?" Mark asked. Apparently the trunk had not convinced him.

"Of course." She kissed them each again, sorted through her music, drew on gloves and was gone.

"What shall we do?" Benka asked immediately. It wasn't a question but a demand for action.

Mark was on the last chapter of his survival book and saw the opportunity to demonstrate his newly acquired information. Actually he would be glad when school started. The only thing at all interesting going on over the summer was the club. He hadn't belonged to any clubs in America. "Go into the bedroom," he told his sister, "and wait."

"Can I sing?"

"Okay. But don't open the door. When I'm ready I'll come get you. And find something to use as a blindfold."

Benka clapped her hands, excited. "What's going to happen?"

"You're going to try and survive this room."

Benka nodded. He wasn't going to say any more, so she went into the bedroom and listened. The sounds told a good deal. She heard him go into Mother's bedroom. Benka guessed he pulled off the covers from the bed and dragged them into the living room. Now there was creaking and scraping as something large was pushed across the floor. Next came a noise that required hard breathing and tugging on Mark's part. This was metallic, and scratched and bumped its way across the floor. Then he was hauling a soft unwieldly object, there was trouble at the door and Mark grunted a lot. Everything was quiet for a few minutes. He probably sat down and rested before

overturning the table, there was no mistaking the table. Chairs were upended and sofa cushions tossed. This was going to be a fun afternoon.

Benka sat on the bed and sang the melodies and inner voices to everything her mother had been practicing. She didn't nag Mark about when he'd be ready. He didn't like being nagged. She was happy knowing she would survive the room and win glory. It reminded her of the way he booby-trapped his old room at home, but the magnitude was of another sort entirely, this was an all-out total effort.

Her voice, like two blades of grass breathed through, lifted in a pure reedlike arabesque. She forgot she was waiting for Mark. The external sounds faded, the sounds that issued from her lived. They were real, in a different way, but real all the same. She would have to ask Mark about that.

"All right," he said, coming into the room and tying on the blindfold. She had planned to peek from underneath but he made it too wide. She couldn't see a thing.

"Now," he said, letting her into the game. "It is night. War is declared. You've been sent on a recon mission over enemy territory, and your plane is shot down. You don't know where. You have no idea of the terrain."

"What's terrain?"

"Country . . . what it looks like. You have to feel your way along. And you survive and are rescued if you make it clear across the room. Otherwise you die."

There was a pause. She didn't know it was going to be this drastic. "Like Turtle?" she asked.

"Yes."

Turtle had been purchased several years ago at the back counter of Woolworth's for a quarter. They never got around to naming him. They just called him Turtle. His favorite food was flies. She and Mark went on countless swatting safaris and Turtle appreciated that. He was a great friend. Whenever they came into the room he reached out his long neck for stroking. He especially liked being stroked under his chin. One day Turtle raised his head in a different way. He kept his little eyes fastened on them as though trying to communicate something. Mark saw right away what the trouble was, his shell was going soft. Mark changed the water, but it didn't do any

good. Turtle died and they put him in a box a bracelet had come in and buried him in the park.

"Did Turtle know he was dead?" Benka wanted to know.

"Of course not, if you're dead, you don't know anything. Come on now, take my hand."

But she drew back from his unnatural acceptance. Having a blindfold on was already a bit like being dead, and a small thread of panic wove in her brain. "*People* don't die," she said stoutly.

"Of course they do. You know that."

"No, I don't."

"You do."

"Don't."

"Come on, Benka, cut it out. Do you want to play or don't you?"

She reached out her hand and his closed over it. "I'm going to start you," he told her. "Then you've got to do it yourself."

"I know." She heard the door open and he led her forward a few steps before dropping her hand. She stood alone in absolute darkness trying to make herself angry. If she was angry she could do anything, even sock Mark. Benka stretched out both hands to the side and encountered the doorjamb. She knew where she was now. She had gotten free of the wrecked plane and would walk home through the forest. She had established beyond all doubt where home was. All she had to do was cross the room. She took a bold step forward and her entire body was encompassed by something billowy, an enormous spider web. No, just the bedsheet Mark had draped across the entrance. It fell on her, and in getting herself disentangled she bumped into a heavy, massive object. She ran her hand along it. The desk. She tried going around, but he had propped furniture at the sides. The only way would be through the kneehole—there were caves in this terrain. She dropped down on all fours and crawled through to encounter something that moved under her, that was alive.

She retreated slightly. It couldn't be alive, so she felt along it. It was coiled like a snake ready to strike, and beside it, another snake, in fact, an army of them. She decided it was the sea they had crossed to come to London. The sea moved up and down. She launched herself onto it and it swayed and trembled under her. Now she knew what it was!

On the other side of the bedspring, half climbing, half swimming, she came to the glass mountain. The polished surface told her

nothing until her hand touched knobbed legs. She faced the dining table, and hurled herself at it in an attempt to vault it, but it was too slippery. Feeling for the upper edge, she changed her technique and pulled herself up its surface. Suddenly it tipped and she thought she would fall a thousand feet and be dead like Turtle. Instead her brother had prepared a nice surprise. She fell into the mattress and a mound of cushions.

She stayed in this safe zone for a while and bounced. But she knew she must journey on. An overturned chair gave a lot of trouble, she kept stepping in the rungs and tripping. The headboard of Mother's bed made a great slide, one end balanced on the ottoman. Then she came to what her hands discovered to be the trunk. It lay lengthwise on the floor and the bedroom door was across it. She sat on the door and found herself raised into the air. There were a few moments of seesaw with an unseen partner.

Up and down, up and down. She started laughing. "Seesaw Margery Daw, sold her bed and slept on the straw." She landed with a thud that shook her up and reminded her what the stakes were, survival or Turtle. The course became a maze of drawers. She stepped in and out of them. Squatting, she tried to discern edges with her fingertips. They were set against each other at unexpected angles. She lost her balance and went down twice, but each time, like a cat, was preparing to get up before she landed. In one of these falls she rammed into the wastebasket and heard Mark laugh. The next moment she was at the wall—home free!

She tore the blindfold from her eyes, prancing up and down. "I made it! I survived!"

Mark confirmed this. "You are now an honorary member of the Explorer's Club of Goulton Road, Hackney."

She looked about with a sense of awe at her brother's ingenuity. Forces of nature could not have done a better job than Mark. A tornado would not rip the door off more neatly, or a hurricane toss the heavy table on its side, a volcano tip the steamer trunk over. And it would take an earthquake to land mattress, springs and blankets in the living room. Benka's eyes were wide as she surveyed the cataclysm. It was a major achievement. It ranked with the forty dolls. The bedsprings in particular were noteworthy. Not only were they coiled, but they were tied together. The wonder could not be contained. It broke out as the "Osanna in excelsis" of the B Minor Mass: "Osanna! Osanna! Osaaaanna!"

It was to these strains that Alexandra opened the door. She would have sat immediately, had not all the chairs been upside down. As it was she leaned against the wall. Reaction set in and she slid helplessly to the floor. Mark wasn't sure it was laughter, it could have been hysteria. "I was going to put it all back," he assured his mother.

Her shoulders shook, she couldn't catch her breath. When she did speak, she said, "Why put it back? It's the most original arrangement I've ever seen. Shall we dine on the teeter-totter or the bedboard? What were you doing, trying to trap a wild animal?"

"Sort of," Mark said.

Benka felt her mother deserved a better explanation. "It was so I wouldn't wind up like Turtle."

"I see," Mother said, with the typical noncomprehension of grown-ups.

It took several days to set things to rights and the janitor had to be called to rehang the door. Getting it off was one thing, getting it back proved beyond Mark's powers. The best part was that Mother didn't seem to mind. She didn't even mind about the landlord.

When they first moved in he had been pleasant enough. But increasingly he became someone to avoid. In fact Mother gave strict orders that they were not to talk to Mr. Hewey.

Benka always had to know why.

"We've fallen behind in our rent, that's why."

Benka nodded her head although the statement conveyed nothing to her.

The bad feelings climaxed the day Mr. Hewey sent a crew to fumigate their flat. Alexandra barred the door and later waylaid Mr. Hewey himself, insisting on an explanation. His reply was that he routinely fumigated after each tenant.

"We're still here," Alexandra objected.

"You shouldn't be," he pointed out.

The day began with Benka saying, "If you stuck a pin in the sky, it would rain." It was the day their father replied to the two letters.

Alexandra tore the envelope open, started reading and dropped it. Benka watched the envelope, like one of Mark's paper airplanes, settle to the floor. The typed pages fell straight down in a pile. Alexandra put her arms about both children. "Don't be frightened," she said.

Until that moment it hadn't occurred to Benka to be frightened. She was held so close that when she looked into her mother's eyes, she saw herself, miniaturized. How impossibly small she was, like Alice when she almost drowned in the pool of her own tears. Mother clutched at her spasmodically. Benka pried away her fingers and slid off her lap. It seemed to her a diminished seventh was being played in the room.

Mark was moving slowly, as though he didn't want anyone to notice. He picked up the letter. Benka wasn't watching his face, you could never tell anything by Mark's face. But the hand holding the letter tightened as though the piece of paper were heavy.

"He's married," Alexandra said. She didn't speak to the children. It was a fact she reiterated to herself so she would know it and remember it and live with it.

"Who's married?" Benka asked.

"Father," Mark said hurriedly, so his mother wouldn't be forced to repeat it.

"But he's married to us." A storm broke in Benka's body. She went into her room and closed the door. Was it because of the

cream pitcher? Father asked for it one morning at breakfast and she forgot to turn the handle toward him. He made a fuss and told Mother the children were barbarians. Daddy was always threatening to send her away to school. Daddy didn't like her much. No one did but Mark. She poked herself in the stomach with her fingers, not liking herself either. Father had given her a slap on the wrist because of the cream pitcher. Mother cried, "Steven!"

Father said, "She has no manners at all."

"What do you expect, she's six years old!" To Benka she said, "Finish your breakfast." They argued about which of them she took after, and Father said again that the solution was boarding school. Mother snorted, that would be the day, she could see him laying out money for boarding school. At which Father muttered they could always sell the piano, and Mother stormed out of the room. That left Benka sitting in front of the cereal. She remembered sitting there until lunch and falling asleep about four. By dinnertime she was reprieved and allowed to go upstairs. Dinner was sent up to her. She was dizzy from fasting but she wouldn't touch it.

At bedtime her father came into the room and put his arms around her small hostile shoulders. "What is all this, why are you such a stormy petrel? Can you answer me that?"

She couldn't because of the knot in her stomach. She knew the knot was hate, but she didn't know whether it was herself or him she hated. When they came to London she decided it was neither of them, it was her mother.

She hated Mother for taking her away, and for making her practice. Mark opened the door quietly, saw that she was best left alone, and closed it.

Benka listened to the silence, then she got her crayons and coloring pad and took them into the living room and lay on her stomach. She colored a great dark sky with sun and stars in it. The sky swooped down on the sun like the wings of a predatory bird. Mark was holding a book, but not turning pages. He looked pale and remote. Mother had partly smoked four cigarettes. Mother's eyes were deep pools of knowing, a knowing that got inside Benka's head and made her want to scream. She started another picture with Mother in the center. She didn't draw well, Mother was a stick figure with a circle for a head. Everything around Mother was black. And it was closing in. She scribbled faster, bringing the dark shades closer. Her already shortened black crayon snapped from

pressure. She didn't pause, but colored over the stick figure.

A moment before it had been Mother, now the center was filled with the same black nothing that had gobbled up the rest of the paper. Even though Mother was obliterated, you could still see eyes peering out. She looked at her model. Mother's eyes would never see in the regular way after looking where they looked. The great black swirl on the page was where Mother looked. It opened its black center and closed over her. Abruptly Mother reached out and picked up the drawing. It was such a mess that no comment was possible.

Her mother seized on the first picture, it gave her something to say, she could break the silence. "Benedickta, when you make a drawing you must decide a simple thing like, Is it day or is it night? I mean you can't have both a sun and stars."

"Why not?"

"Because it's impossible, because . . ." Suddenly her mother was shouting, "Because I say so. Do you have to question everything I say and everything I do? It's intolerable. I won't stand for it." Her mother left the room.

Benka said in a kind of musing way, "Why did she throw the floor lamp at me?"

Mark looked annoyed. "Don't make up stories, Benka. Things are bad enough without that. She did not throw the floor lamp at you."

"She did."

"Benka, it's plugged in. If she'd thrown it at you it would have pulled out."

But Benka was determined to be angry. Anger was more familiar to her and easier to handle than the terror that had hold of her. "She threw it at me all right."

Mark gave up on her and went back to his book.

It wasn't the end, it was the beginning of terrible things. The next day Mother was mean to Tabby. Tabby came to the kitchen window as usual, as usual Benka opened it, and the big yellow tom jumped to the counter, a second bound bringing him opposite the icebox. Benka got out the milk.

"Oh, no, you don't." Mother took the bottle from her. "We're not wasting food on alley cats. Get that animal out of here."

Benka was so surprised that for once she did as she was told. But her mother continued in the same cross voice as though she

had not been obeyed. She used words she had been using all along, but there was something new about the way they were uttered, like an evil incantation. They came in a series: bills, rent, costs, money, war. Each word was wielded to jab, to cut. "I must be crazy," her mother ended up. She was looking at her, so Benka assumed she was speaking to her, but when she continued, it was plain she wasn't. ". . . to drag two children half across the world." Suddenly she seemed aware of her daughter. She bent down to her. "We must have faith. Everything will be all right." She said this to persuade them both. Benka wanted to get away. She only liked scenes she generated herself. She decided to cut a hunk of clothesline for a jump rope.

But Mother had other plans. She sat her before the piano and made her practice. When she finished the interminable Czerny exercise with hands sufficiently clawlike, and had made the run in B major getting through all the sharps, she was allowed to slide off the bench.

Benka still had jump rope on her mind. But Mother was now seated at the instrument and a Mozart cadenza in a major scale stopped her midflight. Crystal and fragile, raindrop caught on leaf gently shaken. . . . All sensory impressions blended into the music. It carried past what was in the world to what might or could or ought to be there. That moment Benka forgave her mother everything—the cat, Father, practicing, the criticism of her picture, telling Mark things and not telling her, everything. She was hearing a wonderful gentleness and love at the keyboard. It had not been part of her mother's playing until now. A chord in D minor carried sadness that was enough to break your heart.

For the first time Benka understood that her mother didn't have the right words for her children because everything she thought and felt went into her fingers. At the piano she was tender and loving and put her arms around you in a way that made you want to stand there quietly and not run off. But the phrase ended and Benka started for the door.

"Benedickta!"

She stopped.

"Your dress is on backwards. Why do you always put that dress on backwards?"

"So I can button it."

Her mother did not listen to the reply.

"Remember, you're not to speak to Mr. Hewey."

"Why do we have to stay here?"

"Because," Mother said absently.

"Why do we have to stay here?" she asked Mark. He was outside on the stoop.

"Because," Mark said, "we haven't any money."

"Why don't we?"

"I think it's because Father got married."

"So what? So what if he did get married? I don't care. I don't care as much as my pinky fingernail." But she knew that all the trouble started there.

Mother sat at the piano and played. She forgot to fix meals, she forgot to eat. Mark checked anxiously with the calendar. There were several dates which had been circled. Mark tried to interest Mother in those ringed days. "Tomorrow is the concert you won in competition. You're to play at Regent's Hall."

Alexandra's fingers wove an arpeggio, but it was not part of the music she was scheduled to play. She played right through tomorrow and the other circled days.

Mark tried again. "I'd like to hear you on the thirtieth," he said, "that Bach concert. Can we come, Benka and I?"

Her fingers flashed, Ives's atonal emptiness came as an answer. Then silence as her hands dropped to her lap. She turned them over, looking at them in a puzzled way. The fingers of one hand passed over those of the other. " 'Promising,' " she whispered, "that's what they said at the conservatory. And later, the *Boston Globe* said, 'Roland plays with rare fire.' " Her hands fell against her side. "I did try, Mark. You know the hours I put in. But they kept me waiting, the managers in stuffy offices. And when I did get an opportunity to play, I was cut off. 'Thank you, that will be all.' It's an entrenched little clique. They don't want an outsider, someone who's trying to come back, who's been out of things, they don't need it. They don't need me."

"But the dates on the calendar," Mark protested.

"For a church. They're not even paying me. They'll give me some small part of the collection plate. . . . I made my debut with Klemperer. And I recorded for radio, 'Musical Experiences,' that was the name of the series."

Mark looked at the floor. He didn't want to hear. Benka was playing jacks. She had gotten to fivesies when her mother reached

out and pulled her into her arms. Benka found herself cradled, rocked like a baby. "Oh, my darlings, trying isn't good enough. Trying is shit. You've got to succeed. That's the only thing that counts. I let my time, my moment go by. Don't do that, promise me you won't do that. The guts, the talent, the confidence, it leaves all at once. And there's nothing.

"I studied to be a pianist. I never studied to be a mother. I love you so much, only I've made wrong decisions and hurt you." Benka tried to wriggle from her grip, but it was steel. "Mark," she continued, reaching for him as well, which gave Benka the opportunity to slide from her lap and escape, "you're older, Mark. You'll understand and explain to Benedickta. You see, my life never coincided with reality too well. I dreamed dreams that in the beginning seemed possible. But the gap was there . . . and it kept widening. I thought I could convince your father, remind him that I had a press book of good reviews. I thought he'd see it my way, be proud, want me to succeed. But he must have been seeing her then. He must have thanked his lucky stars that I wanted a divorce." She got up and crossed the room. It was an aimless motion. "It's cold in here. Don't you find it cold?"

Neither child answered. It was no different than always. Old Tabby was stalking up and down, pressed against the window, crying to get in. Mother opened the window for him and poured milk into a saucer. She had forgotten her earlier prohibition. Benka went to the button box and tied a plump red button on the end of a length of thread. She dangled this before Tabby. It merely irritated the yellow cat, who did not interrupt the lapping of milk. When he had finished the subsequent cleaning of himself, he condescended to bat at the button. Benka laughed. Alexandra smiled a distant smile. She was far away, looking at things they couldn't see, a pastiche of past and present overlaid with future. She whispered, "Mark."

"Yes, Mother."

And when she didn't continue, he said, "Don't worry, Mother. It will be all right."

She nodded. "Yes. Benedickta . . ."

"What?"

"Come give Mother a kiss."

"No."

Alexandra picked at a piece of fluff on her old jersey. "It's time

for bed. Don't forget your prayers tonight, Mark. Make Benedickta say them with you."

"Yes, Mother."

Alexandra started for her room, then turned with resolution. "Do you see any tears on my face?"

Both Benka and Mark looked at her in surprise.

"Remember that. No tears."

Benka went back to teasing the cat. Mark watched for a few moments. "Well, I guess I'd better put Tabby out."

"No. I'm going to take him to bed."

"You don't want to do that, Benka. He's an old alley cat. He's probably been in all sorts of garbage cans and things."

"I don't care." She lugged the huge yellow animal to her bed and put it under the covers with her. She always undressed under the covers where it was warm, and kept her nightgown under the pillow.

Mark came back from the bathroom in his pajamas and got into his bed. "Say your prayers, Benka."

"I already did."

"I didn't hear you."

"I said them when you were in the bathroom."

"Which one did you say: Jesus Tender Shepherd, hear me . . . ?"

"No. I just told God that everything I said last week still goes."

"That's not a prayer and you know it."

"Why isn't it?"

"Don't be sassy, Benka. Say a regular prayer like Mother told you."

"Okay." She galloped through it to the Amen. Mark was mad at her and wouldn't say good night. Recently Benka had made a change in her sleeping habits. She slept with one foot outside the covers so she could run if something bad happened.

Benka woke first and, opening the door to Mother's room, climbed into bed with her. After a while Mother would get up and make breakfast. But there was something different about the form under the covers. She knew. Although *what* she knew, she wasn't able to understand. She drew back the comforter and looked at Mother's face. It had folded in on itself. But the bad part was Tabby. The cat followed her into the room, jumped on the bed and began

walking on Mother's face. Mother's eyes were open and the cat stepped into one of them.

Benka slid off the bed. She ran for Mark and tugged at him. He tried not to wake up. "What is it?"

"Come look at Mama."

Mark rolled away from her and pulled the covers higher. The next instant he had thrown them off and was on his feet and running. "Mother!" he shouted. "Mother!" When he reached the bed and looked down he stopped shouting. He became silent. He did everything silently. He took the bottle of pills from Mother's hand, he had to force each finger off, as though they were welded to the bottle. Silently he picked up a piece of paper on the floor. Then he tried silently to kill the cat. Tabby turned into a fluid shape of undulating fur. The back lifted, claws raked, a spitting demon tore at him. Mark began to drip blood. The cat got away.

"Why are you so mean to Tabby?" Benka demanded.

Mark began to cry. He didn't cry often, in fact, hardly ever. It surprised her that he was crying now. She reached out a hand to touch Mother. Her brother snatched it back, but not quickly enough. She pulled away from him and ran into the kitchen. There was a pot on the stove for heating water. After several tries she got the light going under it and began rummaging in the drawers. There was a shadowy knowledge in her, but if she moved fast enough, maybe she could change it, reverse everything back to where it had been.

"What are you doing?" Mark was standing in the doorway.

"I'm fixing a hot-water bottle. Mama is cold."

"Benka, Mama is dead."

She stopped everything she was doing. The knowledge she was keeping back broke like a dam. She remembered Turtle. He had splayed from his shell, and all his soft parts hung out. "I didn't know *people* died."

"Yes, you did. I told you."

"For good and all?"

Mark sat down suddenly on the kitchen chair.

"I want Mama," Benka said.

Mark didn't answer.

"I want my mama."

"Benka, stop it." His voice was not like Mark's voice at all.

Maybe he wasn't Mark but someone else pretending to be Mark and saying these bad things. She tried to rush by him to get back to Mother, but he caught and held her. She behaved not like poor Turtle who accepted its fate stolidly, but like Tabby, hysterically fighting this person who pretended to be Mark and kept her from going to her mother. She twisted, arched, spat and clawed the already bloody arms that held her. Quite suddenly she stopped and put her face against his chest. A dark current ran from Mark to her and back. It was always there, invisible to anyone but them. It reassured her now. This was Mark—really Mark. "Where are we going to put her?" she asked her brother. "We don't have a park anymore."

"You don't put people in parks. Someone comes for them."

"Who?"

"Mother left us a letter. I guess to tell us what to do."

"She wrote us a letter?"

He unfolded it, read it to himself and didn't say anything.

"Did she tell us what to do?"

"She says, call the American Consul. She wrote the number."

"What will they do?"

"They'll get in touch with Father, and he'll send for us to come to New York."

"I don't want to go there. He divorced us."

"We'd better do what Mother wanted."

"Why? She's dead."

"Benka, what's the matter with you? Look, there's a part about how much she loved us. Shall I read that?"

"No. I'm mad at her."

"Benka, don't you understand what's happened?"

Benka stared at him with no change of expression.

"She said she tried—and to forgive her—and that our father would have to take care of us. She said she didn't know which way to turn."

"What does that mean?"

"Benka, stop pretending."

"I'm not pretending."

"You are."

"Not."

"All right." Mark sat down on the same chair he had just gotten

up from. "I don't want to go back to New York either. Father's got a new wife and a new kid. A girl."

"Like me?"

"I doubt it. Anyway, this one is a baby."

"How do you know?"

"I know because I read the letter."

"Mark." She whispered, not wanting Mother to hear. "What happens when somebody dies?"

He took her hand. "Everybody dies, Benka."

She pulled her hand out of his, away from his words. But the next moment her hand felt its way back. "Even us?"

"Of course. You know that too."

"No, I don't."

"Come on, Benka, cut it out." He added thoughtfully, "Of course, older people mostly die first."

"Was Mama an older person?"

"I guess so, but not that old."

"How come she died then?"

Her brother was silent.

"How come?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

She could see that Mark was thinking about what to do, so she hummed to herself and waited.

"We could stay at the clubhouse," Mark said.

Benka was impressed. She didn't know there was a clubhouse. "Is it the one I'm an honorary member of?"

"I was kidding. It belongs to a bunch of us chaps from school."

So this was one of his secrets. "Where is it?"

He hesitated.

"If I'm going to live there, you'll have to tell, won't you?"

Mark admitted the logic of this. "It's in a furniture shop."

"A furniture shop?"

"A secondhand one. Antiques, kind of. There's a place in the back where they store the stuff before they put it in the front to sell. And that's where the clubhouse is."

"Can we go there now?"

"I don't know. It's just for us chaps."

Benka spoke casually, not looking at him. "You won't leave me, will you?"

"Don't be stupid," Mark said. "They'll put us up all right."

"How do you know they will?"

"Because this is an emergency. The whole American Consul will be looking for us. Like spies. They'll hide us." Having settled that in his mind, he began to move about. "Take the food out of the icebox."

"Are we going there now?"

"Yes."

She opened the door of the icebox. "There's nothing there."

"Look in the cupboards."

She found a half-eaten box of oatmeal.

"Put it into a paper bag," Mark directed. "And get dressed. Put on your coat and take a sweater and change of clothes."

She did as he said, stuffing things into a sack. Her sweater was in Mother's closet. She went into Mother's room and past the bed. She didn't look, but took her sweater off the hook and came out again. She tried to cram the sweater into the bag and it split. "I can't get everything in."

"That's all right, I'll put some of it in a blanket. We'll need a pot to cook in. And matches." He collected these items, then lifted the imitation mandarin jar on the kitchen table. Under it were some pound notes. He folded these carefully into Mother's letter and looked around. There seemed nothing else to do so he walked into the living room and looked at everything. The last thing he did was close the bedroom door.

"No!" Benka dropped the paper bag and started to scream. Trailing screams, she pushed the door open, ran into Alexandra's bedroom and threw herself on top of her mother. She remembered yesterday, Mama tried to rock her on her lap and she slid off. Now she wanted to be held. "Mama, Mama. We're not going to leave you, we're not."

Her brother stood holding the ends of the blanket together, waiting for her to realize that what lay on the bed was not their mother.

"Come on now." His voice was gentle and sad. Benka joined him at the door. They both looked toward the bed.

"Now I lay me down to sleep," Mark said.

She added her voice. "I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen."

They went out and closed the door. She followed Mark into a

drizzling London morning, paying no attention to streets, just following.

"How much further?" she asked once. They were in an alley.

"We're almost there." They trudged along, not detouring puddles, splashing through them. "This is it." Mark stopped and, setting down the blanket, slid under a metal railing.

Benka put the paper bag beside the blanket roll and slid under too. There was a short drop on the other side. She craned around and let go, landing beside Mark. Trash cans lined a brick wall, dented, without lids, half filled with decaying refuse. "It smells bad."

"Shut up, Benka."

Things were old here, the way she had never seen oldness in America. The door Mark pushed against was warped, some of its boards bulging out, the wood splintery, black from rain and weather. Mites burrowed in it and the smell wasn't one smell, but thousands of trapped odors.

Mark couldn't get in. He tried forcing the door, but it was no good. "I thought they left it open," he said.

"What shall we do?"

"Wait. Here, sit on the blanket." He pulled their belongings under the rail. "Somebody will be along pretty soon."

She sat on the folded blanket, but the cold of damp cobbles penetrated.

"Remember who you are," he said.

"Mark, if you don't want to, you know, die—do you have to anyway?"

"It's not up to us, Benka. Not usually," he added.

"Who then? God?"

"Maybe. Partly your creature."

Mark talked like that sometimes.

"A creature's an animal," she said.

"That's right. If your creature's strong, you don't die."

"I'm strong. I'm very strong." Then she remembered that Mark wasn't strong, that he had a delicate chest. Measles, mumps, whooping cough, she never felt too bad. She would get tired of being in bed, get up and go over to visit Mark. He always lay perfectly still without a pillow under his head. She used to wonder if he was really sick, or just taking the opportunity to think all the thoughts

in the world. Because when he decided he was well, he'd get up and be as before.

"Will you die first and show me how?"

"Okay," he said indifferently.

"But then I'd be alone," she said in panic.

"Benka, will you stop worrying? There are tons more dead people than live ones. I mean, there has to be if you count everyone that ever lived.

"I guess so." A minute later she said, "I think I'm going to throw up." Mark picked up a newspaper and tried to hold it in front of her, but he wasn't quick enough. She vomited all over herself.

They were joined by a skinny boy who jerked his thumb at Benka. "Who—or what—is that?"

"Oh, hi, Bill. She's my sister."

"She stinks. What's she doing here?"

Mark stood up. He pulled the boy by his elbow. "I've got to talk to you a minute." They moved on down the alley. Benka watched them. She was glad Mark was her brother and not the other boy. When they came back Bill looked at her curiously. He unlocked the ill-fitting door and she and Mark followed down stone steps. It was dark in contrast to the day outside. She had the feeling of things looming overhead. Bill lighted a candle, and she saw they were in a kind of warehouse. There were dozens of dust-covered dressers and chifforobes. A brass bedstead leaned against the wall, a stained mattress beside it. Closest to her was a chipped buffet with a marble surface but only three legs. The dust got up her nostrils and she sneezed. Bill set the candle in a tin on a table, around which a stool, two straight chairs and a wicker rocker were pulled.

Bill addressed her. "Seeing as how it's an emergency, we might suspend the rules, temporarily. Sorry about your mum," he added.

"Why should you be sorry? You didn't even know her. Once she threw a lamp at me, not the little kind. A floor lamp."

"Shut up, Benka."

"Well, she did."

Bill nodded. "I know," he said cheerfully, "my pa beats the stuffings out of me. But only when he's had his pint, mind you."

"Oh, look," Benka said, "a chest." She wiped it off with the hem

of her dress, opened it, emptied her sack of clothes into it and climbed on top of them.

"What are you doing?" Mark asked.

"I'm dead, like Mother."

Mark did an odd thing. He turned his body to the wall and beat his fists against it. Bill looked from one to the other, the composed child in the chest to her distraught brother. He didn't know what to do. Not knowing, he sat down on the rocking chair. Three more boys of assorted sizes wandered in. "What smells in here?"

"She does." Bill pointed with his thumb. They were surprised to see a girl in the chest staring at the ceiling.

"Do you have a cat?" she asked one of them. He shook his head. They huddled out of earshot. Then Bill approached Mark, who was calm again and seemed removed from things, simply not interested.

"It's all right with them," Bill said, "you being refugees like. But you got to pay for your digs."

"Oh?" Mark felt in his pocket. The money Mother had left was safely in the letter whose edges he touched, but which he was too canny to display. He brought out a penknife. "This all right?"

"What else you got?"

He searched his pocket again and came up with a pair of dice.

"Righto." It was settled. They were to stay. "Can't you give her a bit of a wash? There's a tap outside."

The little girl thought sounds. They popped into her head out of nowhere. She floated in the music, it seemed to drown her. No, that was Mark scrubbing at her with a wet cloth.

The boys were outside too. They were making a lot of noise, egging on someone called Tim from Rafferty Street. She and Mark watched as twelve garbage cans were rolled together. Tim from Rafferty Street took his bike a half-block away and, pedaling like a maniac, made for the line of cans. Benka was pleasantly horrified at the inevitable approach and collision, but nosing his handlebars into the air, Tim careered over the entire twelve cans. The boys nudged each other, pleased with the look of dumbfounded amazement on Benka's face.

"He's a proper champ, Tim is," Bill informed her. He was friendlier now they'd paid, or perhaps she smelled better.

"Is he world champ?" Benka asked.

"Not half. No one else even knows about this sport. He invented it himself."

Tim smiled and his face looked pointed. "I broke me collarbone and I've broke me arm twice and me legs once, but in two places."

"Did it hurt?"

"Yep."

"Can you teach me to jump garbage cans?"

"You're a girl."

The boys sauntered up the alley, leaving her and Mark. Later Mark went shopping, and again she listened inside her head. This time it was music her mother played and she began to cry.

He brought back chocolate bars, apples, a box of crackers, milk and a slice of cheese with cloth hanging from one side stamped in purple letters. Benka ate one of the chocolate bars.

"Want to play cards?" Mark asked, and took the battered set of fifty-one out of his jacket. The missing card was the five of clubs, so when a four played, they put on the six. Mark suggested dealer's choice, but when it was his turn he would choose Concentration. She didn't like that game. He always won, as if he could see through the backs of the cards. Benka liked Old Maid, but three were needed for that.

The only light source in the subterranean room was a small grilled square that gave onto the alley at foot level. They lay on their stomachs in front of it so they could save the candle and still see. "Why am I Benedickta?" she asked, shuffling the cards. "Why not Mary or Jane, a name like other people have?"

He didn't bother to answer. This was a question she asked a lot. They wound up playing Fish. In the middle of the game her eyes filled and tears spilled onto her cheeks. Others clogged her nose.

"Don't you have a handkerchief?" Mark asked.

Benka shook her head.

"I tell you what." He folded the cards together; it was too dark to play anymore. "Let's sing 'White Coral Bells.' "

That was nice of Mark, he hated "White Coral Bells." They sang in parts. The last chorus she sang alone, her voice small, high, perfect, sounding like a bell itself. "Are we going to live here?" she asked Mark.

"For a while."

"How long?"

"Until I get a job, then we can move."

"What could you do?" The only talent Mark possessed that she knew of was that of transporting bumblebees. This seemed to her a remarkable ability, but she couldn't think exactly what use it would have. "What could you do?" she asked again. There was sudden sound from the metal door at the far end of the storage area. Someone was unlocking it. They wriggled behind a couch with broken springs. Two men entered, illuminated by a faint flood of electric light. One man was black. "Which is he wantin'?"

"That's it, in the corner. Biggest goddamned piece in here." They dragged out the bed Mark had planned to sleep on. One of them complained about his back.

"It's not the back, man. It's hernia, that's what you got to watch out for, hernia." Once on the other side they gave the metal door a shove and it fell to with a clang.

"What kind of place is it out there?" Benka whispered.

"A regular furniture shop." Mark came out from behind their bulwark. "It's secondhand stuff. One of the boys' fathers, he runs it." Mark added casually, "It's stolen."

"I don't believe that. It's too ugly. If you're going to steal, why not steal something nice?"

"For once I agree with you."

That surprised her. They ate more chocolate and he announced it was bedtime.

"How do you know?"

"I'm sleepy, that's how."

"I get to sleep in the chest."

"Okay."

"It's like the cedar chest at the back of the closet at home." She climbed in. "If I'd never gotten born out of that cedar chest, I'd never have to die. Is that right?"

Mark put his coat over her and told her a Baba Yaga story while she grew sleepy. Then he went to improvise a bed for himself. He chose the couch with broken springs, jamming the blanket in the cracks to make it approximate a single surface. The black snow of night sifted, filling up the room.

"Mark . . ."

"What?"

"I want a light."

"We can't, Benka. We have to save the candle."

". . . Are you thinking about Mama?"

"Yes."

"What are you thinking about her?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"I was thinking about what you said, why she called you Benedickta. . . . It was the way she thought about you, something special. Me too, I suppose. I held it against her, that she expected more than other kids' moms. Remember how she'd say, To be gifted was from the Lord, and it was a sin to waste a natural gift. I hated her to talk like that. But when she was at the piano, that was something else. I mean, the screaming, getting upset, that didn't matter anymore. . . ." His voice trailed off.

But Benka knew. "I think when she threw the floor lamp at me, she knew it was plugged in."

"She didn't throw it, Benka. You made that up."

"Well, you don't have to go on about it."

"And the times she was cross and yelled at you, that didn't mean she didn't love you."

There was a pause.

"Where do you think her love is now?"

It was Mark's turn to be silent.

"It's not just dead like she is?"

"Everything dies, Benka. Right? In winter, trees die and flowers, stuff like that. That's the natural way."

"But they come back. Mama won't come back." She screamed it out, making herself angry to banish the other feeling that made her cold at the center of her stomach. "Can I come sleep with you, Mark?"

"All right."

She thought he sounded glad. She climbed out of the chest and trailed his coat across the floor. She lay down beside Mark. "I wish I'd brought the button box. I liked all those different buttons. I liked the pearly ones best. Didn't you?"

"Go to sleep."

She did go to sleep under the coat close to her brother. In the morning she lay still and kept her eyes closed, pretending to still be asleep because she didn't want to be in this place. Finally Mark shook her. "Do you want to hear a boring dream?" she asked.

He laughed. "Get up."

He had some cold water in a tin that he'd filled outside and there

was a pot to go to the toilet in and throw outside in the alley afterward.

"I don't like it here, Mark. I want to go home."

Mark didn't say anything.

"Mother died from that bottle, didn't she?"

"What bottle?"

"The bottle in her hand."

"People take medicine when they're sick," he said evasively.

"She wasn't sick."

"Yes, she died from the bottle. Now can we stop talking about it? Here's some chocolate."

"I don't want any more chocolate."

"Finish the milk then."

"I don't want the milk. I want to go home."

He asked, "Where is that, Benka?"

"Where Daddy is."

"You think I should do what Mother wanted? Phone the American Consul and ask them to get in touch with Father?"

She could tell he wasn't really asking, just revolving it in his mind.

He made no decision, not then. They blindfolded each other and played the plane was down, finding their way through this new and intriguing maze of furniture. It wasn't as imaginatively positioned, but there was a lot more of it. After a while the club members came. They wanted another payment.

"We're not staying," Mark said, "we're going to America."

On the whole Mark wasn't much fun on the trip. He worried about things exactly like a grown-up. He even played Concentration reluctantly. But Benka gave herself over to the novelty of the ship. When the weather was rough the steward spilled a few drops of water under the serving plates which made them stick where they were and not slide.

It was an Italian Line, *Grimaldi*, and there was spaghetti with every meal. One of the officers demonstrated how to swivel it against a spoon, but it was more fun to slurp. A carafe of wine was placed before them. Mark forbade her to have any, although he considered himself the proper age to imbibe.

The third day out they had lifeboat drill, putting on bulky jackets and standing in rows on the deck so the captain could see they had them on right. Actually it wasn't the captain, but the purser. Several passengers condoled with Mark and Benka for traveling alone in such dangerous times. They said it was wise to get back to the States. Mark seemed to understand, he predicted the Sudeten would fall to Germany. At this a belligerent argument erupted among the adults. Benka was bored. Since they weren't torpedoed, she considered the whole exercise and the arguments stupid.

Besides, she knew it wasn't the international situation that was bothering Mark.

He wasn't sure how pleased Father would be to see them. But Benka didn't waste time on that. He was their father, wasn't he? He had to be glad. *She* was, although she didn't remember him too clearly. What she remembered was his coat, heavy, rough material

that he used to catch her up against in a bear hug. The coat smelled good. A good Father smell.

It was nearing the end of the crossing. They had explored every cranny on the ship, especially belowdecks, where they discovered a foundry with a man in an undershirt working bellows and making sparks fly. He forged tools, softening the metal in fire and hammering it into various shapes.

On the last day when they were on deck, trying to sight the Statue of Liberty, Mark said abruptly, "Benka, you should kiss Father when we meet him."

"Are you going to kiss him?"

"No. I'm going to shake hands."

"Then I'll shake hands."

"It would be better if you kissed him."

"Why?"

"It would make him like us more."

"Okay. I was going to anyway."

"There's the Lady, there she is. Look, Benka!"

"You mean we're in New York?"

The steward found them. "When we dock, you two are to get off last. The captain radioed ahead. Your father is meeting you." He smiled. "You kids must be very excited."

"Well, we're not," Benka said.

"Shut up, Benka," Mark tossed off absently. "That's Ellis Island, and over there, that's the Battery."

A miniature world with toy buildings and cars and people was coming into view. There was subdued motion within the ship as passengers directed their luggage and jammed the rails. With a final clang the engines were cut. When the noise ceased they felt motion under their feet. The tugs secured their lines and they were guided in. A covered section had been hauled into place from the pier, and along this people began disembarking.

"There you are, Benka and Mark." A young woman who had made friends with them came to say good-bye. "You two will be seeing your father. I'm so happy for you."

The young woman was pretty. Benka wanted to look like that, blond hair pulled back tight instead of a flyaway dark tangle chopped off unevenly below her shoulders. It used to be much longer but she cut it and Mark had to fix it up. He hadn't done a very good job. The young woman hugged her and joined her own family. Sud-

denly Benka was terrified. She looked around at Mark. But his face was closed. "Remember," he said.

She didn't remember what she was to remember. The covered gangplank was steep. She held onto the railing and her coat flapped about her. At the bottom stood a big man, silhouetted, with light behind him. She got closer. She remembered now, she was to kiss this enormous, faceless human being. She estimated in about half a second she would be kissing him.

"Hello, Benka."

She propelled herself, pushing off from the slat and grabbing for him. He caught her and she kissed him hard, squarely on the mouth. Her father was embarrassed. The steward was watching. Father set her down quickly. His coat didn't smell the way she remembered. It was a different coat.

Benka turned to see how Mark did. He extended his hand. Their father ignored the gesture and slapped him repeatedly on the back. "Mark, I can't believe it. You're a young man." Mark had been more successful than she.

"Well," their father said, "do you want to give me your luggage stubs?"

"We don't have any luggage, sir. We left in too much of a hurry."

"No luggage?" He looked severely at Mark. Benka knew they had been given a black mark. In the taxi she got a better look at her father's face. It wasn't as pronounced a face as Mother's. It was more a random face. He was saying, "It's too bad Laverne couldn't get away."

She started to say, "Who's Laverne?" But Mark kicked her.

". . . The baby had colic."

"It's probably just temper," Benka said. "Mama used to say with me she never knew if it was colic or temper." She had withdrawn her legs out of Mark's reach.

Her father laughed uncertainly. "Probably," he said. "Anyway, I've a room for you at the Gotham. My boss arranged it. It's where we hold our conventions. I'll pick you up after office hours and we'll take the train home."

"Sure. Fine," Mark said.

"It will give you kids a chance to wash up."

"We washed already," Benka said.

"Well, I imagine there's still a little travel dust." Their father seemed annoyed.

"Yes, sir." Mark was alertly polite.

Benka decided to redeem herself. She knew how to do this. She knew what grown-ups liked. She thought over her repertoire and, using a high, winsome and completely fake voice, said to her father, "I know how to make a beautiful little star. Do you know how to make a beautiful little star?"

Her father cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I don't."

Mark was leaning forward looking at her, trying to judge if she would carry it off. "Well, you take an apple . . ."

"An apple?"

"Yes, an apple. And you slice it very thin right across. Mark can do it, and then you hold the round piece up to the light and in the very center is this beautiful little star."

"Why, that's lovely." Her father was completely charmed.

Benka shot a triumphant glance at her brother, who settled back.

"You're a very poetic child," her father said.

"And musical. And I have perfect pitch."

"And you think well of yourself." He laughed.

Mark interceded, "That's just Benka's way."

"She reminds me of your mother."

"Mama's dead," Benka informed him.

"He knows that, Benka."

"Yes, I'm very sorry. It must have been tough on you kids. But everything's going to be all right now."

"It wasn't tough," Benka said, "it was fun. We stayed at a clubhouse."

Mark said quickly, "She's too young to really understand." He said it in his shut-up-Benka tone. Their cab stopped and a man in uniform came from under an awning to open the door on Mark's side. Benka climbed over her father and brother and got out first. "Are you a lion tamer?" she asked the doorman, because in one of her old picture books there was a lion tamer dressed in much the same way.

"Only in my spare time." He smiled as Mr. Roland put change in his hand. They went inside and Benka stood by Mark while their father got a key at the desk. It was a small lobby and there were several trees in pots, also a tall stand with sand on top. "What's that?"

"Spittoon."

Benka spat in it. "Bull's-eye."

Mark said under his breath, "You'd better behave yourself. We'll wind up in an orphanage."

"I *am* behaving myself."

"That story of the star was sickening."

There wasn't time to reply. Father had joined them. He rang for the elevator. The inside door was gold and it folded back. The elevator man was black. But the interesting thing about him was that he had only one arm. His sleeve was pinned neatly at the elbow. Mark observed this at the same time Benka did. He pinched her to remind her not to stare. Benka conscientiously averted her eyes. She knew better than to ask what happened. That would hurt his feelings. That wasn't what she really wanted to know anyway.

They stopped briefly on the second floor and started up again. She formulated her question carefully. "Where *is* it?"

"Benka!" her father and brother said in one voice.

"That's all right." The elevator man laughed. He seemed to think it was funny. He bent over and whispered, "I keep it in the broom closet."

"You don't," Benka scoffed.

"Where do you think I keep it then?"

"In the umbrella stand?"

"You're right. Sometimes I keep it there and sometimes I keep it behind the desk in those pigeonholes they have for keys and mail."

"Benedickta," her father said, using her full name, "face front."

"I am." They got out at the fifth floor, following their father down the hall. There were doors on each side, bigger slots where they filed people, like in the pigeonholes behind the desk. They entered one. The room had satin drapes, green- and yellow-striped, and the furniture was bowlegged. Benka opened the door to the bathroom, and saw the tub had clawed feet. "I love the bathtub. It's my favorite bathtub in the whole world."

"Benka," her father said sternly, "that episode with the elevator man was very embarrassing for your brother and me. You must learn not to speak to strangers in a personal way. Or make personal comments."

"Yes, sir," she said, imitating Mark.

Mr. Roland stooped down, mollified, and kissed her on the forehead. "We want to make a good impression on your step-and-a-half mama."

"Yes, sir," she said again, because it worked so well the first time.

"Well, now, you have four hours until I pick you up. Don't leave the room. In fact, you'd be wise to get a little shut-eye. You can order sandwiches if you're hungry. Pick up the phone, Mark, and ask for room service, just don't overdo it."

When he had gone Mark went to the window and looked out. "Benka, you did that on purpose with the elevator man."

Benka completed a tour jeté in the middle of the room. "What's a step-and-a-half mama?"

"It's a cute way of saying stepmother."

"Because stepmothers are wicked and send little children out into the snow with only bread crumbs in their pockets?"

"Just in stories. Laverne is probably all right. But you keep on like this and you'll wreck everything."

"Then what will happen to us?"

"They could separate us. Send us away to school, or put us in an orphanage. So if you don't like it with Dad and his wife, just remember it could be worse."

Benka opened the wrapping on a bar of soap. She smelled it and brought it to her brother. "Want to smell?"

He shook his head.

"It smells good." She stood beside him, looking out the window. "Where do you suppose all those people are going?" She was talking fast, running words together because of the cold-hot feeling in her stomach. It was so cold it burned like ice that's stuck to your fingers. Mark knew about the pain in her stomach because he suggested they sing "White Coral Bells."

"I hate 'White Coral Bells' now too."

"You do?"

She nodded. "I must have grown up." She carried the soap back to the bathroom and stared at the claw feet on the tub. "What do you think of Father?"

"Okay, I guess."

"He has a new overcoat."

Their step-and-a-half mother was sitting in a station wagon at Larchmont, waiting for the train. She rolled down the window when they were introduced and told them to get in the back. She had large teeth, but they were perfect. In fact that was the trouble with Laverne, she was flawless.

The suburban home was on a large flat lot. There were no good

hiding places. The house was medium-sized with three bedrooms. One was the nursery and belonged to Darlene, who cried a lot. The master suite was for Father and Laverne. She and Mark shared a room upstairs. The grown-ups left them to "rest up before dinner," by which they knew they were to stay in their room.

Laverne didn't raise her voice, but it was the kind of voice that carried. "You mean to say they arrived here in the clothes they stand in, and that's it? It's disgraceful. What kind of woman was she?"

"She didn't intentionally neglect them, I'm sure."

"Well, what did she do with the money you sent?"

"Probably bought a piano."

"Do you realize what it is going to cost to totally outfit two children? And don't expect me to contribute. I told you there's to be no commingling of funds."

"The financial responsibility is mine, naturally. That was the understanding. Don't worry, Laverne, I'll manage."

"Since when have you ever managed? It's a good thing my dad left me with a roof over my head and a little something to get by on. If I had to depend on you . . ."

"It will work out, I know it. And I want to say, you've been a brick, Laverne."

"What's a brick?" Benka whispered.

"Just an expression."

"What's an expression?"

"Shut up, Benka."

In the morning Mark lectured her about getting off to a good start. It seemed for a while as though that might happen. The baby was different from last night, quite good-natured, and an outing was planned to the local zoo, which had a children's section.

"You can pet the animals," Laverne said, "and feed them. Will you like that, Benka?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good, then pile in the station wagon. Mark, take Darlene. Oh, and that bag, it's got a bottle and diapers and a pacifier."

Mark scooped up the baby in one arm and the bag in the other. The baby liked Mark, she cooed and laughed. She was a pretty baby, plump and fair, with round blue eyes. Benka felt that cold-burning sensation in her stomach again. They had been in the car about ten

minutes when she said, "I think you'd better stop."

"Didn't you go to the bathroom before you left?"

"It isn't that. I'm going to throw up."

"Are you sure?" Laverne asked in consternation.

Benka nodded. Her step-and-a-half mother pulled the car over and Benka got out by the side of the road and stuck her finger down her throat. Nothing happened. She got back in the car.

"Well?" Laverne asked.

"I feel better." A somewhat grim silence descended on the outing. They couldn't find a close parking space. Laverne showed Mark how to open the portable stroller and fasten the baby in. He pushed it along and Darlene was given an arrowroot cookie. Benka wanted an arrowroot cookie but she didn't say so.

The children's zoo was penned away from the rest of the attractions. It contained a goat, three small pigs, a burro, some sheep and a rabbit hutch with a fat mother and six nursing young. Mark took Darlene out of the stroller so she could see the rabbits. Mark's face was soft with the pleasure of what he was doing. Benka pinched the big rabbit, hoping it would bite him. Instead it turned around and bit her. She let out a wail.

"Now what's the matter?" Laverne asked.

"The rabbit bit me!" She was able to wave a bloody finger.

. . . And that night: "I mean, whoever heard of being bitten at the children's zoo? The attendants were terribly upset. They said it had never happened before. I think there is something wrong with the child."

"My dear, she couldn't help getting bitten."

"I'm not so sure."

Up in their room Benka said, "I'm sorry, Mark."

"I saw what you did to that rabbit."

"I said I was sorry. Anyway it was your fault."

"Mine!" Mark cut a V in his big-toe nail and turned off the light.

Benka leaned across her twin bed toward him. "You've got to promise me that you'll hate Darlene all your life and never love her."

Mark only laughed.

She was an outsider. It took her exactly a week to lose her British accent. But by then the damage was done. During the first assembly when the rest of the school sang "Of thee I sing," she piped, "God save the King." When the teams were chosen on the playground she was left until last. After school no one walked home with her. Mark stayed and played ball and she had to walk by herself. When she passed other girls they giggled. She would have reached into herself and dug out her soul with grimy nails and handed it to these pigtailed, curls-over-the-finger peers, to win a place. She grieved and moped and was more than usually unpleasant to everyone.

The third year she remembered who she was. Her mother, at the instant of birth, looking at her, had known, and called her Benedickta.

Closing her eyes tightly, she recalled her mother's full contralto, telling her . . . *Work, practice, reveal your talent. It is there.*

She was eleven years old and she decided she had a destiny. She began to practice after school on the piano in the auditorium. She participated in the musical plays and Christmas programs.

She had found her niche, an area where she was sought out. Some of the girls wanted to be friendly. But Benedickta had changed her mind.

Her voice, as underdeveloped as she was, could hardly be heard at the back of the auditorium. But there was a quality that was arresting and distinctly hers. She signed herself *Benedickta.* She was no longer Benka.

Benedickta was quite a different person. Benedickta looked around her and saw all sorts of things Benka had ignored. The war, for instance. Last winter Mark told her the Germans were bombing London, maybe even Goulton Road and the clubhouse. She had carried on, but she really couldn't visualize it. Now she worried about Tim from Rafferty Street. "Is he old enough to be fighting?"

"No," Mark said. "But he could have lied about his age."

Their father was eager to do his bit, which infuriated Laverne. The only thing she had ever congratulated him on was being overage as far as the draft went.

"I could always enlist," he said in rebuttal. "Or join the Canadian army."

Laverne whooped at the idea. "I can see it. Boot camp, the whole thing, I can just see it."

Benedickta thought her father daydreamed not so much about enlisting as being sent away from Laverne. Very quickly she and Mark understood that the house was Laverne's, that Laverne had property and a private income, which was for her and Darlene. Laverne also let it be known that their father's earnings were completely inadequate.

About this time the conferences began behind closed doors. And Laverne announced herself pregnant. Benedickta found it hard to believe. How could anyone, especially her father, pierce Laverne's brittleness? There existed an armed truce between herself and her stepmother. Benedickta kept out of her way. Her main contribution was to baby-sit so her father and Laverne could "get away from the house." Darlene, a plump, placid three, was no problem. Benedickta forgot she had sworn to hate her and actually was quite fond of the child. None of the nightmares Benka used to have troubled Darlene's sleep. Her slumber was rosy.

Benedickta was cannily aware of events outside. Her nose sniffed as though trying to detect . . . a minefield. There were more conferences, and a general atmosphere of stress.

She routinely stayed after school to use the piano or sometimes went by the music store and listened to opera. She saved her babysitting money toward an album, which was secreted in her room. It had taken a year to purchase, during which she envisioned this particular night . . . alone in the house.

Benedickta tiptoed out of the nursery. She went into her room for the album and took it downstairs to the phonograph. Her choice

was *Aïda.* She was drawn to vocal music; it approximated the music in her head. This private world no one could encroach on. Tonight with the house to herself, she set the disk on the machine, turned off the lights and flicked the switch. The record arm rose and positioned itself. At Aïda's first tormented phrase, *"Ritorna vincitor!"* she was part of the music.

She had pored over the translation on the jacket and now strained to understand the words filling the room. *"Ah! non fu in terra mai da più crudeli angoscie un core affranto!"* . . . the mystery of them, the anguish in the shifting auditory expectation. She dwelt in the land of the Pharaohs, in the Nineteenth Dynasty. In the palace at Memphis she prayed. It must be a prayer—*"Numi, pietà del mio soffrir!"* A concentrated legato line. The A flat and G of *"Ah, pietà!"*

The B flat, C of the final *"soffrir"* opened her own throat. She didn't hear the car in the driveway—she sang the Act II duet with Amneris in her head—or even the voices in the hall. Aïda recognized her father among the prisoners. *"Che veggo! Egli? Mio padre!"* The ensemble singing swept over her.

Shrill exploding laughter tore the texture-woven sound, voices loud with after-dinner drinks.

From the floor Benedickta/slave girl/princess said, "Shut up! Shut up, can't you?"

A stunned and absolute silence bracketed the outburst. She tried to explain. "It's an opera. *Aïda.* "It's . . ."

Laverne, always pale, was chalky. "You see? You see what I have to contend with? And in my own home! I won't stand for it. I won't!" She dragged Benedickta to her feet, slapping her.

Benedickta's eyes stormed, her nostrils flared, her lips parted over her teeth. "You stupid cow bitch."

"Listen to her filth." Laverne sobbed hysterically.

"Benedickta." Her father's fury spilled through the words. "Get to your room." . . . "But you, King, you, lord, with your great power, spare these lives" . . . She moved to the machine to take her records. Laverne was there before her. She ripped them off and threw them on the floor. *"Ah, pietà!"* Benedickta stooped down and began to collect the pieces.

"To your room!" her father bellowed. But it was no longer Amonasro, it was *her* father, Steven Roland, who stood by and allowed this to happen, who blamed her. She continued methodi-

cally gathering broken bits of record. When she was quite finished she went upstairs.

It was impossible to get away from her stepmother's voice, it filled every chink in the house. She wondered if it would sound better in Italian. "This is the end. I've tried everything. You can't say I haven't tried with that child. She is impossible, unreasonable, inattentive at school. I'm constantly on the carpet. *Me.* I'd like to know what *I* have to do with it? It was bad enough before. But now, you know I can't be aggravated. I can't be, Steven, or I'll start to spot again. Do you want me to lose the baby? That's what it will come to if that girl stays in my house. Did you hear what she called me? Did you? You should have boxed her ears."

"Laverne, she's not a criminal, she's a little girl. Can't you . . . ?"

"No, I can't. Not in my condition. She'll have to go."

"We're talking about Mark too, you know."

"Mark's so different. How they can be brother and sister, I don't know. But you always said, if things didn't work out, an inexpensive boarding school . . ."

"I've never heard that boarding schools were inexpensive. And now, with a new baby to think of . . . the whole situation has changed."

"Well, that's your problem. But I'm telling you, you're not going to tap me for a nickel."

Although it didn't stop downstairs, Benedickta stopped listening. Would it be boarding school? Could he afford it? What was the alternative, an orphanage? And what about Mark? Had she ruined everything for him too? She hadn't meant to let the words out. She was almost as horrified to hear them as Laverne.

She recognized her father's tread on the stairs. Once again, like New York, like London, things were ending.

Her father knocked. "Benka," he said from the doorway.

"I know it's my fault."

"It's too late for that, too late for any apology." He came farther into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "You've been very difficult, Benka. You've disrupted our lives for three years."

"I know."

"You never tried, never made the slightest effort. You have to understand I can't have Laverne constantly upset, especially now."

She looked at him steadily. "So what are you going to do with me?"

"It's going to be rough, with a baby on the way . . ."

"Just tell me."

"Tomorrow we'll start looking into schools. Nothing fancy, mind you." They spoke calmly as though discussing an event that concerned neither of them. "It doesn't have to be permanent. You could learn to get on with Laverne."

"I wish I were older. I could be on my own."

"I wish you were. I don't believe you are intentionally unruly. You're . . . well, undisciplined, like your mother."

"Am I like Mother?" she asked eagerly.

"Very."

"She took her own life."

"Yes."

"What about Mark?"

"Mark? Mark's a different proposition. He made an effort, made himself useful around the house, was good-natured about things. Mark fit in. Of course, it's up to him. He can decide. Laverne is fond of Mark."

"She treats him like a servant."

"That's enough."

"Father . . ."

"What is it?"

"*If*, I only say *if*, Mark wants to be with me, he can, can't he?"

"I think I know what Mark will say. We'll make inquiries about coeducational schools." The atmosphere was full of rests that she counted in quarter time. "I don't believe it's altogether your fault, Benka. But you can see things here are impossible. If it doesn't work out for you, you let me know. We can always make further inquiries, come up with something. Okay?" Her father patted her on the shoulder and went out.

So that's the way you got rid of a daughter. You made inquiries. One difficult, hard-to-handle girl in need of placement. Oh, Mama, why didn't I stay in your lap that night? If only you could hold me now. If only somebody could. She realized she was reverting to Benka. But there was no fairy-tale mousehole through which she could leap backward. She had to deal with what had happened. It seemed to her it *had* to happen, if not tonight, tomorrow or the day after. Laverne, from the first, was determined to get her out of the house. Carrying a child gave her the necessary edge. Pondering this, Benedickta even found it possible to be sorry for her father.

Outmaneuvered, pushed to a decision he didn't want to make. But he *had* made it. He had agreed they were to go.

Perhaps boarding school wouldn't be too bad. She asked herself what was so great about being here. A house built with the mortar of respectability. The flat in London was better. With its volatile atmosphere, the passion of Vivaldi, Corelli, Bach woven nightly by her mother's fingers. And sometimes Mama took them by the hand and taught them a folk dance. These were the highs, the wonderful highs. At other times Mama threw herself across the bed and screamed at them if they came near. Those were the lows. But you knew the highs would come round again.

Here it was colorless, you went to school, the members of the household addressed each other politely. There was no music. There were no folk dances. Good heavens, the rugs would have to be rolled back. No disorder was permitted, so it grew inside. The disorder inside her was very great. Part of it was on account of Mark. *Mark fit in.*

As she thought of him, everything jammed up. She imagined all her organs drawn magnetlike, sticking to each other in a great blob.

Mark was naturally a much nicer person than she was. It took a great deal of effort for her to be nice to people. In fact, it took a lot out of her. Mark admired their father, he thought Darlene was cute, he even got on with Laverne. He liked people, and they liked him.

For her to like people they had to prove themselves. There were so many miscellaneous people walking about, why should you like this one or that one? Mark had proved himself a hundred times over. He looked after her, took care of her, told her what to do . . . even though she didn't generally do it. But here in this house, he was under a spell, the spell of the mediocre. He made friends at school, played softball, worked out at the gym, went to games. He even had a paper route. He cheerfully undertook chores in the house, carried out garbage, went to the store for items Laverne forgot. They didn't play games any longer, or have private talks. He had been swallowed up.

*I'll die*, she told herself violently, pulling her knees tighter against her stomach, trying to loosen the knot that cramped her. *I'll die if Mark doesn't come with me.* Wave after wave wracked her. She fell over twisted on the bed, set her teeth and waited it out.

Afterward she knew two things: that she would not die, and that

she would become herself, Benedickta Roland. She started to sing Dowland, "Flow My Tears," from her music appreciation class, sixth period.

The song quieted her. She recognized a strength in herself, a steady strength such as her mother never possessed. Perhaps she owed this to Mark. Or had she forged it just now? Her body straightened and she was composed.

Mark would think he had to come with her. That's the way Mark thought. That's what made him Mark. She wanted him with her. But if it was worse for him, she could do it on her own. It was simple, she would put her few clothes in a bag, just as when she left Goulton Road.

Now she would be leaving Larchmont. It was like threading Mark's maze, cautiously putting one foot before the other until you came to the wall. Benedickta could do it. She was glad she had become Benedickta. Like Benka, Benedickta had wonderful sounds in her head. They would go with her. They had taken on new forms, arias, whole operas! They were her hidden strength. Laverne might smash *Aïda,* but she couldn't smash what was in her head. She turned to her mother, herself unable to survive, who had known *she* would. Her mother named her "blessed."

When Mark came up she was calm. "Hi," she said. "How was the game?"

"We won."

She nodded.

"I just heard about the fracas."

Benedickta laughed. "I should have gone to the game with you. I was baby-sitting, doing her a favor."

"Did you really call her a cow bitch?"

"That's what she looked like at that particular moment."

"Benka, they're talking about sending you away."

"I know. It's all settled. Will I ever be glad to get away from here."

"Benka, it's not too late. If you went down and apologized . . ."

Benedickta started to hum Dowland. "I learned it in music appreciation."

"What I want you to do is make everything all right, so you can stay."

". . . Until next time. You know I can't do anything right in this house. I want to go. I really do."

"You don't know anything about it. Laverne won't touch her money. And Father can't afford a first-rate school. Suppose it's worse than here. What could you do about it?"

"Run away."

"And end up in reform school. Great."

"Is that what they do when they catch you?"

"Yes. Benka," he continued earnestly, "I'll go downstairs with you."

"I'd do it, Mark. Honestly. But it won't work. In a week, two weeks, we'd be up here and you'd be saying the same things to me."

"Yeah," Mark conceded, "I suppose so. I suppose I knew it couldn't go on."

"You like it here a lot, don't you?" She managed it lightly. "I mean, your friends at school and all."

He looked at her with something of the look of Father. "I'm going with you, Benka."

She put the pillow over her face. He pulled it away and she tried to turn the crying into laughing, but she didn't fool him. "What did you think?" he asked.

"You don't have to."

"Benka!"

"I mean it. You like it here and . . . I'll be okay. You can come see me all the time. If you want."

"Benka, it isn't that I *like* being here. I just figured that's the way it was and I'd make the best of it. That's what you don't understand, how simple it is, how easy, to be polite to people. Sometimes that's all it takes."

Benedickta groaned. "Why am I so awful?"

"Your whole life you've been dragged around. We were both of us always in the way."

"I don't think that's the reason, I just think I'm me."

"Shut up, Benka."

She liked his saying that, it was like always. "Did you tell them you are going with me?"

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"I think Father was glad. He said I should look after you."

"I bet Laverne wasn't glad. I bet she didn't think you would. Who will fetch and carry and do all her errands, the ones she dreams up to prove how important she is? Do you know something?

She is the least important person I can think of. And she will have unimportant children and she is a cow bitch."

Mark laughed quietly to himself. "She is, you know."

She laughed too, stuffing a corner of the blanket in her mouth so they wouldn't hear downstairs.

"Did you think I'd let you be sent off by yourself?" Mark asked.

She took the covers out of her mouth and stopped laughing. "It would be better for you if you did."

"No, the important thing is to stick together."

She got her feet under her on the mattress and charged, butting him with her head. He sidestepped and twirled an imaginary cape. She flung herself at it repeatedly, then crumpled and rolled up in a ball, shaking with noiseless laughter. "Oh, Mark," she said, catching her breath, "I was so scared. You don't know."

"Yeah, well, it's not going to be a picnic."

"Like the clubhouse?"

"In the clubhouse it was up to us. Here, we're stuck in some crummy school."

"Together," she said firmly.

"I'll make Father stipulate that."

Stipulate, stipulate . . . what a wonderful word! The really wonderful word was *together,* but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of saying it.

The next few days Laverne spent on the telephone. Benedickta sat up in her room and read. Mark was put in charge of Darlene. Steven Roland, as usual, was either at the office or immersed in the progress of the war. "If the Germans don't take Moscow before winter sets in, it will be a repeat of the Napoleonic disaster." The war had kindled something in him. He was no longer just a CPA, but strategist, commander, chronicler. He studied maps, read histories, took notes and expounded theories of encirclement and attack to a bored Laverne.

The family met for uncomfortable meals. At breakfast, Laverne turned to Benedickta and, in her first direct statement in days, said, "You may clear the table."

Benedickta stared malevolently back at her, and it was Mark who started to remove the dishes. Benedickta jumped up to help him. In the kitchen they flicked sudsy water at each other.

"Don't make a mess in there!" Laverne shouted from the next

room. Benedickta mouthed the words silently, and silently they laughed.

"I think I've found just the place," Laverne told her husband. Benedickta and Mark quieted. "The Park School. It has an excellent academic rating. I checked it out with the Board of Education. I also spoke to Mr. Abbot, who runs it. They continue right through the summer. In fact, Mr. Abbot said this was a good time to enter them. Mark will have no trouble. As for Benka, she'll do as well there as anywhere."

"She needs a certain amount of latitude," Steven Roland began.

"Latitude! Really, Steve. You know what she needs as well as I do, a little discipline."

Their father said in a tense voice, "This isn't going to work, Laverne."

"What do you mean, it isn't going to work?"

"I've been going over my finances. I can't afford it."

"Well, you're going to *have* to afford it."

"You know what savings I had went to support Alexandra and the children in London."

"And that's why you married me. You were at the end of your tether, and you thought I'd bail you out."

"Laverne, for Christ's sake . . ."

"Well, it has been convenient for you. A house in the suburbs. A wife that came with station wagon, clothes and furniture. Do you realize you haven't spent a cent on me? Not one red cent."

"Does everything have to come down to that?"

"You counted on my being willing to pay the tab as far as Benka was concerned. But that's commingling. And you'll never catch me doing that. Besides, let them know what kind of a man their father is, all talk!"

"I'm tied to a desk forty hours a week. What more do you want from me? It's you. You've never had to manage, and you refuse to learn."

"Why should I? I'm used to a certain standard. And you promised me we'd maintain it."

"Yes. I've heard all that before. What's yours is yours, and what's mine is yours too. Do you have the address of that school? I'll take them."

"The address is on the table, along with their transcripts from Harrison. But I thought you said you couldn't afford it."

"I'll afford it."

"By stopping my allowance for household expenses, I suppose?"

"That's my business."

"It happens to be my business too."

"Damn it, Laverne. Sometimes I don't blame Benka. You're the one who wants her in school, but you won't help. You place me in this position and then let me squirm. Well, I'm fed up. I've had it."

"What does that mean? You ran out on your first wife and she killed herself. You won't find me so accommodating."

Steven Roland grabbed the slip of paper with the address of the school. "Kids, get packed."

"You can't take them," Laverne said. "You'll be late for work."

"I'm not going to work."

"Oh?"

"Look, Laverne, I don't want to leave like this. . . ."

"Why not?"

He seemed to prepare an answer and then discard it. "You're right. Why not?" He walked out on the porch and waited while Laverne oversaw the packing. Mark slipped in his book, *Surviving The Wilderness*, but that was it. Benedickta's Teddy with button eyes that she took to bed was confiscated.

Benedickta shrugged and, joining her father on the porch, waited for Mark. He appeared with Laverne, who had her arm carelessly over his shoulder. "I'm going to miss you."

Mark shot her an embarrassed grin.

"Race you to the car," Benedickta said, giving herself a head start. In spite of this he pounded past her.

They got in the back and watched their father walk around to the driver's side. Laverne followed him and bent level with the window. "I'll call in for you, Steve. You have some sick time coming."

"Don't bother."

"You're not going anywhere, Steve. And we both know it." She showed her large, perfect teeth, in a perfect smile. "I'm still your best bet. Besides, in spite of everything, I love you."

"Laverne, for Christ's sake, not in front of the children and not in the middle of the street." He started the engine.

Laverne still leaned in through the window. "See you later, Steve."

They had gone several miles when their father cleared his throat.

This was all the preparation they had for his pronouncement. "They'll put me behind a desk, of course. But I'm going to enlist."

"Enlist!" They said the word with totally different emphases, Mark in disbelief, Benedickta scoffingly.

"You didn't say anything to Laverne," Mark observed.

"No."

After his monosyllabic reply there was a short silence before Mark asked, "Will you be able to manage this Park School, if you enlist?"

"You let me worry about that. Laverne doesn't need any help from me, she's made that clear enough. So there's just you two."

Mark was uncomfortable with the conversation. He wanted his father to reestablish the old easy authority. "You think the U.S. is going to declare war, sir?"

"We're bound to come in. Those convoys are sitting ducks. The Germans are going to go after them. And that's all it will take."

"I don't know. Everyone was afraid of a U-boat attack last year, but they kept clear."

"We embarked on Lend/Lease since then. Your problem, Mark, you don't see your dad as stemming the tide of history. You're right. I'm two-A. Out of it due to dependents. But a man has got to look up from his desk sometime, even if it's only to change desks. And I've decided I don't have as many dependents as I listed."

Mark nodded, although neither knew how to go on.

The Park School was an ugly two-story building with rectangular wings bridged by an administrative center.

"I think you'll like being at school, Mark," their father said. "Since Laverne picked it, Park has got to be a no-nonsense kind of place. Right up your alley. And, Benka, you'll just have to dig in."

Benka hummed a tune to show she had no intention of digging in. "Why do they call it Park?" she asked. "I don't even see a tree. All they grow is cement."

"Benka, try to start out with a positive approach."

"I bet the boys are on one side and the girls on the other," she whispered to Mark.

"So what?" he whispered back, and she felt reassured. Aloud she said, "This is the ugliest place I ever saw. It took Laverne an awful lot of phone calls to find one this ugly."

"Shut up, Benka," Mark said good-naturedly, to let her know she had gone too far. She never had a sense of this herself, but Mark always seemed to know.

Each clutching a suitcase, they followed their father into the building. They were met by Mr. Abbot, who, as they later discovered, only appeared on formal occasions. He was a tall, skeletal man with prominent bony ridges jutting over his eyes. His manner was cordial as he shook hands with her father and brother and smiled at her. Benedickta scowled back. It turned out her assumption was correct: boys and girls were lodged in respective wings.

Their father told Mr. Abbot he was joining up. Mr. Abbot thought that highly commendable. He himself was tempted, but of course, his responsibility lay here. When the interview was over, Steven Roland said, "I'll write when I have an address, and you'll let me know if you need anything."

"They'll be just fine," Mr. Abbot predicted confidently. Mark looked intently at Benedickta to keep her from saying anything.

Their father gave her an embarrassed peck on the cheek. "Be good." Mark received an affectionate clap on the shoulder. Mr. Abbot walked Mr. Roland to the car.

"I hate it," Benedickta said. "Not because it's an awful place, which it is, but because Father promised we'd be together . . . and we won't. You'll be in another building. I might not even see you."

"Don't worry, once I get the lay of it, we'll have a regular meeting place."

Benedickta nodded, she knew he'd work something out. "What about Father? I mean, what do you think? Isn't he too old for the Army?"

"Probably not for a desk job."

"Laverne was right about his running out on Mama, wasn't she?"

"I don't think so. They were divorced."

"A scrap of paper, that's what Mama said. And I agree with her. I think he ran out on Mama. And now he's run out on Laverne."

"Benka, are you taking her side?"

"Of course not. I just don't think it's right to use the war—to make yourself out some sort of hero because you want to leave your wife. I'd have a lot more respect for him if he plain left her."

Mark looked at her a moment. "I know why it's hard being you, Benka. You see things too head-on, you don't give any quarter."

"You're right, Mark. But if you're right one more time today, I'm going to sock you."

Mr. Abbot returned. It was as though one Mr. Abbot had gone

out and another come in. All the effusiveness was gone. He hit a small bell on his desk. "Now that you are registered, you will be issued uniforms."

"Uniforms!"

"Young lady, students at Park do not indulge in unasked-for expressions of feeling. You must learn to control such outbursts."

A woman entered whom Mr. Abbot referred to as Miss Birnhouse. Benedickta classified her as Miss Brown Mouse. Brown Mouse led them down the hall, where she unlocked a cupboard labeled SUPPLIES. To approximate size she held up clothes against them, all cut from the same drab cloth. When each had their bundle Mark was told to return to the principal's office where an upperclassman would show him his quarters.

"Wait!" Benedickta was overwhelmed with panic. "When will I see him?"

Miss Birnhouse considered this. "There is a common dining hall, but no mingling. I imagine Sundays would be the most convenient time, after chapel. You would of course have to have special permission."

"Special permission! He's my brother!" Benedickta flung herself on Mark, her arms locked behind his head. She clung and she clung, and she cried. Miss Birnhouse attempted to break her stranglehold. "Father said we wouldn't be separated. Father said!" she screamed at Mr. Abbot, who had been drawn by the commotion.

"Benka," Mark said under his breath, "Benka."

She wouldn't listen.

"You're choking me," he said in an even quieter tone. She let go. "Benka will be all right," her brother told Mr. Abbot.

"I won't!"

"Sure you will. You'll make the best of things. She'll be all right," he assured the grown-ups. Benedickta snorted a denial and followed Miss Birnhouse down dreary halls to a dormitory, where she was given a bed and locker.

"For personal things," Miss Birnhouse explained.

"I don't have any personal things."

"That suitcase of clothes, mainly you won't need them, but the underwear will come in handy."

Benedickta scowled. "Underwear . . ." she said with paragraphs between each word, "is . . . not important. Brothers," the tempo

picked up, she ran the words together, "are important. Mark is the most important person in the world and he knows more than anyone at this fucking school."

Miss Birnhouse remained stoic; apparently she had heard the word before. "I suggest you calm down. How do you pronounce your name?"

"Ben-e-dick-ta."

"What do they call you for short? What was it your brother called you?"

Benedickta beamed hostility.

Miss Birnhouse sighed in the face of such noncooperation. She liked her girls to be Park material. "I'm sure if you make an effort, Benedickta, eventually you'll feel at home."

"Eventually? Eventually I'll be dead." She shoved her suitcase into the locker and closed it with her foot. Somewhere a bell shrilled.

"That's last period. You'll be meeting your roommates. Try for your own sake to make a better impression than you have on me."

There was an accumulation of sound from the hall, scuffing, running feet, young voices calling, murmuring, shouting, laughing. The sound invaded the room, stopping at the doorway and blocking it. Half a dozen girls looked at her and she looked back.

"You're new." A girl with carroty-topped hair came forward. Benedickta regarded her coolly. "What's your name?"

"Benedickta."

There was the usual reaction. "That's your *name*?" Carrot Top asked.

Benedickta knew somewhere in another part of the building the same thing was happening to Mark. Why? Why couldn't they just leave them alone? She knew how boys handled it, boys fought, struck with their fists until one or both or all were bloodied. It was harder with girls. It wasn't direct. How did you reply to remarks half heard? To derisive laughter, to giggling?

Benedickta sat on her bed. The girls gathered in cliques, stowing books and papers. A sexy way of wearing a middy blouse was demonstrated, rolled from the bottom, pinched tightly at the waist and secured on either side by safety pins. Benedickta guessed it was getting close to the dinner hour for this type of preparation to be going on. She jumped up and brushed out her hair and patted her face with cold water. Everything she did was observed. How dreadful it was going to be with no privacy. The bell rang again and she

marched with the others to the girls' side of the dining room. The boys entered in more straggled lines.

She spotted Mark the instant he came in. He was taller than the boys around him and more slender. Also he walked as if he were alone in a forest glen or loping along a deer path. His thick dark hair had been combed into place, but each step tossed it forward until it fell into his eyes. She could see him glance at the girls' section to find her and she willed him to look where she was.

He did.

He grinned at her across the whole room, claiming her. He was glad and proud she was his sister.

"Who's that?" the girl beside her asked. "The new kid?"

"That's my brother." She spoke loudly, so that anyone who was interested knew.

Sunday after service was free time. Parents visited then. No one came to see them.

"We'll hear," Mark said.

"Maybe," Benedickta replied.

It was a school surrounded by city. However, they rambled as in country meadows, making use of signboards for their game. There was a huge one advertising cigarettes, showing a man trout-fishing with a cigarette dangling nonchalantly from his mouth. "Looks like the current's too strong here for crossing," Mark said judiciously.

"Do you think we could ford it further up?"

"Could be. We'll try by that boulder." And so they explored mountain streams past liquor stands, markets and dry-cleaning establishments.

They settled into two routines: the school's and their own. After lights-out they met at the back of the building where the day's garbage was dumped. They squeezed through a crack in the wall into the world Mark made. He made it from anything at hand. Many times they floated down the Mississippi or hiked the Yukon. For a while they had a wonderful wolf dog who was the sled leader.

In school Benedickta barely scraped through. The exception was music. Mr. Adams, the choir director, soon had her leading the soprano section. She loved choir practice. They were doing a Handel oratorio, *Samson,* and all day she went around singing it in her head. "Let the bright seraphim . . ."

"Seraphim are angels, aren't they?" she asked Mark.

"I guess so," he shrugged, not interested in seraphim, but added,

"I think they're the little ones you see in paintings."

"They're burning bright," his sister informed him, "with goodness."

He didn't laugh. He never laughed at her, but simply filed the information along with percentages and other things he was learning.

"Why do you bother?" Benedickta asked. "Studying, I mean."

"Benka, I don't do it for them. I do it for me."

"Get good grades?"

"Learn things."

Afraid he might apply this abstract principle to her, she changed the subject.

Pearl Harbor happened for them in an unscheduled assembly. Over the radio Franklin Delano Roosevelt denounced the infamy of the sneak attack. America was at war.

Mark was silent and she knew he was thinking about Father. He could be anywhere. . . . "Father's all right," she blurted out. The thought of anyone shooting at her father was inconceivable. He was not the type of person people shot at. They had each written a letter to be posted when he sent them some kind of address. Mark told her it probably wouldn't be where he was stationed, because of security, but the letter would be forwarded.

For a while Mark spoke a good deal about Father. That was when they still expected to hear from him. As Christmas approached each built a hope that neither communicated. But the holidays came and went with no word. "The hell with the bastard," Mark said.

At the end of the first semester she and Mark were summoned to Mr. Abbot's sanctuary. Mr. Abbot drummed his long fingers on top of his desk thoughtfully before addressing them. "Well, young people, we are presented with a problem, a quandary you might say. It seems that your father, who, if you recall, informed me he was enlisting in the Army . . . did *not,* in fact, enlist."

Benedickta looked at Mark in bewilderment.

"He's not in the Army?" Mark stuttered slightly as he spoke the words.

"He is not." Mr. Abbot anticipated the next question. "No one seems to know where he is. I have spoken to Mrs. Roland and she has no idea as to his whereabouts. This places the school in a very difficult position. *Had* he been in the U. S. Army there is a Dependency Act which would take care of costs here. However, it is an

awkward but certain fact that your father is not in the Army, that you are not covered, and no additional monies have been received."

Mark spoke in a reflective tone. "I don't suppose our stepmother . . . ?"

"As I say, I've contacted Mrs. Roland. She cannot or is not willing to undertake your tuition at Park. It is all unfortunate, most unfortunate. We at Park deeply regret that at the end of the semester it will not be possible for you to stay on."

Benedickta smiled at Mr. Abbot for the first and last time. "That's all right, we don't mind."

"But we do," Mark said. "What I mean, sir . . ."

"I know what you mean. But I'm afraid I have no answers for you."

"I see." The radiator was turned too high and her brother had become very pale. Outside in the corridor she asked, "What *does* it mean, Mark?"

"Look, Benka—it's always been you and me, right? Now it's official, that's all."

"But what happened? Where's Father?"

"It looks like he cut out—on all of us, you and me as well as Laverne. Maybe it was having another kid."

"It was Laverne." She nodded her head sagely. "But why didn't he send money for us? And why all that stuff about the Army?"

"I don't know. I can't figure him."

"I suppose he wanted us to be proud of him."

Mark didn't say anything. It was harder for Mark because he'd always looked up to Father. "And," Benedickta continued, "he didn't send money because he doesn't have any."

"I'm going to call Laverne," Mark said with sudden decision.

"Why?"

"Maybe she'll do something."

"You mean—pay money?"

"You're right," Mark said. "But there is one thing I want to ask Mr. Abbot. Come on." He went back and knocked at Mr. Abbot's door. "Excuse me, sir. There's something you can do that would really help us, Mr. Abbot. Would you recommend as strongly as you can that no matter where we go, or what's done with us, that we stay together? It's very important to us, sir. And it's what our father wanted."

Mr. Abbot nodded, the boy spoke well, and he was a nice boy, good in his studies, good in athletics. What a little waif his sister was, standing just behind him, her black eyes consuming her face as she waited for his answer. "I can promise you, I will certainly make that recommendation."

Benedickta took a breath. She didn't know she had been holding it.

She and Mark spent hours in austere rooms waiting on hard benches. She told him the story of *Aïda*. "In the end they are both buried alive."

"Say, that's all right."

They were interviewed together and separately by a social worker, who moved them along to a psychologist. She gave them puzzles and games with words that were mildly interesting. At least you weren't sitting on a bench.

"It's funny waiting," Benedickta whispered to Mark, "when you don't know what you're waiting for."

What they waited for was a series of temporary homes, poor, crowded, with unwashed children and infants. Certain things they had in common, crayon marks on smudged wallpaper, which was torn or peeled away, and oleomargarine. Oleomargarine was white and came in tubs like lard; enclosed with each package was a small tray of bright-orange coloring matter to be mashed in, giving the look of butter. That was generally one of her jobs.

Her main impression from these days: the poor never throw anything out. Open a cupboard and stacks of newspaper reached to the top or precariously balanced brown paper bags tumbled down.

They moved twice. In the first place, the husband got drunk and smashed everything he could lay his hands on. The police came and the following day a social worker. They were moved to another home which smelled like the first. The only difference was the location of the bathtub in the kitchen, filled with potatoes. The toilet was a filthy cubicle and Mark told her not to touch anything in there.

One of the welfare kids got sick and they were transferred to the Belden household, which seemed neither better nor worse than the others. Mark said the momentum had slowed. He said new cases were more pressing and that's why they stayed.

In the concrete between buildings a bed frame rusted. A family of rats made their home in the lumpy, urine-stained mattress beside it, grew bold and ventured into ancient pathways along the water pipes, peering into the room where she slept with four younger children.

Benedickta eyed the rat, got up and stalked it to its hole, which she plugged with rags. Rags too were plentiful. She was afraid to sleep from then on, and she was afraid to put her foot out of the covers. She imagined the rat ready to sink its long incisors.

She woke with a start. Mark was sitting on the edge of her pillow, patiently waiting for her to wake up. He motioned her to follow, and they sneaked onto the roof, escaping into a world occupied by the two of them. Mark peopled it. He was a great reader. One of the first things he did was provide himself with a library card. The places, the ideas, the personalities he described became the threads, the continuity their lives depended on. Often he took a flashlight and read to her. High on cold slate, that was the real world. Countercreated by Mark.

Thirteen stories up, leaning against a skylight, Mark said, "You know what I'm going to christen us? The Tenement House Goats."

Benedickta laughed.

And Mark told her about the goats on the island of Maui. "They aren't wild, just ordinary goats brought there by Captain Cook. And they live in this wonderful tropical valley, with all they want to crop and graze on. They have no natural enemies, no predators, so you'd think they'd stay in the valley. But they don't."

"Why not?"

"They're not content just to eat. You know what they do, Benka? They climb."

"Climb?"

"Yes, thousands of feet up the cliffs. And no one can figure out why. I mean, they're not too surefooted and there is no reason for them to do it."

Benedickta's eyes gleamed. "Yes, but think of the fun, way up there."

"That's it." They understood each other, the current between

them ran deep and spontaneous. "That's it. The challenge. That's what nobody understands, just us and a few Maui goats."

Some evenings they'd climb down instead of up and walk to a nearby park, dodging cops, stepping over winos. Mark was reading *The Brothers Karamazov.* He gathered a Dostoievsky mood around him. "Alyosha is crazy in a way, because there's no motive in his life except love. Everything seems simple and easy because he is guided by that one principle. . . ." Mark, no longer able to contain what he felt, threw himself with abandon to the ground.

"What are you doing?" Benedickta asked, awestruck.

"Hugging the earth."

Benedickta sank into the grass and held it to her also. But the gesture was a disaster. One outflung hand had to be washed off at a drinking fountain. "Damn dog," she said, angry and humiliated because she loved the earth as much as Alyosha or Mark. Why did everything turn out like this for her?

A retardee was added to the group, a huge blubbering boy of sixteen who tried to waylay her on the stairs. Benedickta was too quick for him, and Mark, divining the situation, had what he called "a talk with him." After that she had no trouble.

Mrs. Belden was a withered, sere woman, whose entire energy was focused in the production of a booming masculine voice which continuously broadcast a list of complaints. The curious part was that she had a legitimate complaint which was never incorporated with the rest. Mr. Belden beat her regularly. Mr. Belden had a hauling business, he hauled everything from trash to furniture. The second year he made Mark his assistant. It was heavy work and Mark developed a cough. A small persistent cough that did not go away.

Mr. Belden was supposed to pay him, but when he asked for his money, Belden said, "You get fed, don't you?"

"You get money for that," Mark pointed out, "fifty dollars a month from the welfare agency."

"You think that covers it, do you? You and your sister eat us out of house and home. We lay out a lot extra on you two."

"You told me I'd get paid," Mark said doggedly.

"Look, kid, I could send you away. Right? All I got to say is you're uncooperative. And Mrs. Belden, she says she wants to keep the girl. And that's the way it would be."

The blackmail was always the same: do this—or we'll separate you. So Mark hauled and Benedickta was buried under a mound of chores.

"Never mind," Mark said grimly. "The day I'm eighteen I'll take you out of this. We'll go to Cortina. That's where Somerset Maugham goes in the winter to drink mulled wine. It's served hot and spiced with nutmeg."

"Where is Cortina?"

"In the Dolomites, the Italian Alps."

She filed Cortina away along with mulled wine. "Why do people go there?"

"For the skiing or because they have tuberculosis."

"We'll learn to ski, Mark. I know we will." She spoke quickly and earnestly because she didn't like that other word. Since he had been coughing, he often used it casually like this, as though if he grew accustomed to hearing it on sunny afternoons it would not hide in the dark of his mind.

But it was Benedickta who had the first encounter with blood. She went to her brother.

Mark reassured her. "That's what makes you a girl. All girls, I mean, when they grow up, menstruate. You're a woman now. You could have a baby." He told her what to get at the drugstore.

She went out of her way to find a pharmacy with a female clerk. She made her purchase self-consciously, scrunching her shoulders to hide her breasts that pushed aggressively against her too-small, too-tight dress.

On the way home she stopped at a department store and, using the ladies' room, arranged the pad. The route was through the commercial district. It took her past a kiosk. This was not one of *her* newsstands, but it would do. She had five stands at which she practiced acting.

The tide turned for the United States and its allies in 1944 and the news was no longer grim. However, there was sure to be a disaster somewhere, which she turned into a personal experience. Reading her lover's name in the casualty lists, she leaned against a wall while people brushed heedlessly by. She made use of a bewildered gesture, hand to forehead, followed by a dazed plunge into traffic. She was so involved with the improvised scene that she forgot the traffic was not part of the play. An angry cabbie yelled at her.

There were other favorite spots. Casual passersby might see a

church, but to her it was a dungeon-castle-fort with long rows of wide steps. She loved these steps. She loved to die on them, an Aztec maiden about to be sacrificed, escaping queen felled by an arrow. Aïda, for whom she had written an escape sequence—until fate caught her here on the stairs. The technical feat of falling the entire flight, dropping to her knees, taking her weight on her shoulder, rolling to her hip, was learned under Mark's direction at night. Her trip back from the drugstore brought her past their nocturnal church. During the day it was a busy center with crowds passing.

She heard music. Music from her half-forgotten life. Music played by her mother. Benka, it was long-ago Benka who listened, who stole up the church steps, pushed open the carved double doors and reentered her childhood.

Mama, London, the cold-water flat, Benka and Mark as they had been. The long Bach passages held it all in the architectural columns of moving, living sound. She walked down the aisle under the galleries and the massive rib vaulting. She began to sing: *"Wann kommst du, mein Heil? Ich komme, dein Theil, ich komme!"* She recognized the cantata in her throat before her brain named it, *Wachet Auf!* "Sleepers, Wake!" Mama's fingers weaving the magic. Her voice strengthened, joining the flood of sound.

With infinite compassion the music called. She approached the organist, who neither paused nor noticed her. She mounted the stairs until she stood beside him and the magnificent pipe organ. The German words were released as though she had used them yesterday. She was the sleeper who woke.

When the last chord died, the old man turned. His eyes were a mild shade of gray, but their glance penetrated. He looked dusty and old, but the dust couldn't hide the glow in his eyes. He is a dusty jewel, Benedickta thought, maybe if you blew on him, the oldness would go away. She saw that his neck thrust forward from his shoulders, and knew that his life had been spent straining to read notes, interpret scores. "Remarkable," he said to her. "Do you know other Bach?"

Benedickta smiled at him. "I can sing anything you can play."

"Very well. Let us try 'Jesus, Joy of Man's Desiring.' "

"I only sing in the original language."

The neck shot out another inch to scrutinize her. "Who is your teacher?"

"My mother."

"She must be a great artist."

"She was. Alexandra Roland."

"The pianist. I have several of her recordings. A great loss . . . I am Harry Osborn, musical director of St. Anne's. And you are—?"

"Benedickta Roland."

"How old are you, Benedickta?"

"Fourteen."

"The voice is amazingly developed."

She nodded agreement. She herself had been surprised at the new and unexpected volume.

"You must not work it too hard." Mr. Osborn peered at her shyly. "You must cherish it, protect it. You have a truly remarkable musical gift, Benedickta."

"I know. My mother told me."

"Do you have a teacher presently?" he asked.

"No."

"If you like, why not come here? Come every day . . . two musicians working together, one old, one young."

Benedickta's face became illumined like the faces of the saints in the fenestration of the windows. "I want to sing."

"You shall. Do you read music?"

She shook her head. "Not well."

"You must sight-read fluently, and you must learn to play the piano and the organ."

"I want to sing," she said stubbornly.

"You shall, you shall. But first it is necessary to be a musician. Meanwhile we will exercise the instrument, but with caution, with great caution." He smiled at her. "You shall sing, Benedickta. But you must work and practice. When you are ready, I will pay you. Ten dollars every Sunday. But only one song. Each week, together, we will prepare a new offering. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Ten dollars." There flashed into her mind rolls with real butter. Immediately she felt guilty, even though half was to be for Mark. The important thing, the thing to remember, when she was good enough she would sing into the auditorium with its great columns and balcony. "I must tell Mark," she said, and turned to go.

"Wait. We have to make arrangements. Here, at the church, every day. We will work one hour."

"Yes." She thought of the mounds of ironing waiting for her.

"We begin tomorrow."

"Yes."

"After school. Three-thirty."

"Yes."

"Where can I get hold of you?"

"I'll be here." Benedickta walked home, knowing Mrs. Belden would be angry.

She was. "Where have you been? The dishes will grow penicillin before you get to them. Are you meeting some boy? That's all I need, a pregnant teen-ager."

. . . He had spoken of her instrument, by that he meant her voice. She, Benedickta, was a body wrapped around a voice.

"And what about me, how am I supposed to get through all that ironing? But you don't concern yourself about such things, Miss High and Mighty."

Without a word Benedickta took up the iron. She was swift in all she did, if not thorough.

"Just that pile of shirts." They were her husband's, the rest of them did not wear ironed clothes.

Mr. Harry Osborn . . . her lips formed his name.

Musical Director of St. Anne's . . . her lips formed his title.

And the money, the money she'd soon be earning . . . she'd get Mark cough syrup and buy bananas. Bananas are filling. They fill up your stomach. But what would Mrs. Belden say when she didn't come back directly after school? Perhaps she'd have to give her the ten dollars to make it all right. She couldn't wait to talk it over with Mark. Mark would know what to do. One of the kids was yelling bloody murder. She glanced out the window, an accident with a bike. Mrs. Belden rushed down to the courtyard and confiscated the vehicle. Benedickta knew this in a peripheral sense. She sensed something else.

She was being stared at. Reggie was the name of the retardee. She swung around and caught him trying to figure out her body, where the separations were and what they protected. When she faced him he backed off. "Get out of here!" she yelled, and threw a long-handled spoon. It struck his belly which his shirt didn't quite cover and clattered to the floor. He backed across the room, his waddling gait taking him out of reach.

He was afraid of her. It would be all right then, as long as she heard him, or met him face on. But in her preoccupation he had been able to sneak up quite close. She wondered how much strength

there was in those dropsical hands. The other kids who traded switchblades and razors the way middle-class boys trade aggies, those she knew how to handle. They didn't bother her, but Reggie made her flesh crawl.

Mark, finished for the day, came into the kitchen looking for her.

"Mark!" She spoke in the special way they had evolved, almost lipreading, the whisper low, the rapidity something they taught themselves to follow. "Remember the Maui goats, the chance to climb?" She couldn't say more. Mrs. Belden came in lugging a still-screaming child. It would be hours before they could talk.

Benedickta slipped from a cold bed into a cold room. She hated the hall. It smelled of stale urine, vomit, cabbage, slopped ice cream and secreted gum. She tried to hold her breath long enough to reach the stairs, but had to gasp it all into her lungs before she came out on the roof. She had climbed into a moon-saturated night. Everything familiar looked strange, even the clothesline which she had ducked under a thousand times. Things always ended abruptly for her. This too was over and done with. Every six weeks the social worker inquired through her glasses, "Is everything all right, do you have any complaints?"

Of course everything was all right. Of course they had no complaints. Mark bent his back to the heavy hauling which started him coughing. And she, the big girl never finishing, never catching up. And their appetites, larger than the amount of food on the table.

They had stopped hoping that someone in authority would rescue them. Now they waited for Mark to graduate from high school. But it was not to be these things. It was the miracle that had occurred in the Church of St. Anne's that would lift them out of this. It was music!

Mark was waiting for her, she started to tell him. "I don't know what made me do it, *sing*, I mean. The music just sort of drew me in. He never turned his head, Mr. Osborn. If he had, I probably would have stopped . . . if he'd looked at me.

"But he kept playing and I went right up to the organ. Music filled the whole church. It was 'Sleepers, Wake!' that Mama used to play. All the words came back to me, everything."

Mark kept shaking his head. It was too much to take in. "And he'll teach you? He said he'd teach you?"

"He didn't say it, but he will. What he said was we'd work to-

gether. And when I get good I'll sing in the church and he'll pay me ten dollars. Ten dollars they don't know about." She jerked her head in the direction of the door.

"Did he say he'd pay you?"

"Yes."

"To sing?"

"Yes."

"He must think you're very good. You must take after Mother." She had been thinking that all day, that she was Alexandra Roland's daughter.

"What will you tell the Beldens?" Mark asked.

She'd had the afternoon to think about it. "That I'm in a play. That there are rehearsals after school."

"She wouldn't let you be in the last one."

"I know, but this time I can tell the social worker, or threaten to. Don't you see, now there is someone on the outside who is interested, who cares, who won't let us be separated."

"Maybe you're going too fast, Benka, building too much on this Mr. Osborn."

"You didn't see him, Mark. He's a wonderful person. Tomorrow you'll come with me."

"Am I in a school play too?" There was something in his voice that made her look at him quickly. His face was beautiful. Hers wasn't, yet they looked alike. But tonight his face was tired, drawn and bluish under his eyes.

"What about an after-school athletic program? I'll pinch some paper with the school heading and write a letter from the coach."

"Belden wouldn't let me go."

"All right then, drop by and meet Mr. Osborn. I know he'll help. I know it."

"The ten dollars will sure help."

"Maybe he'll teach you to play the organ."

"Maybe," Mark agreed.

She could tell he didn't believe. "Remember the Maui goats," she said, "they climbed for no reason. We've got plenty of reason."

"You try, Benka. You try like hell." The fierceness in his voice was held down, controlled, which made it terrible. But it was terrible in her behalf. "I don't want to butt in, Benka. At first it should be just you. Later we'll see. . . ."

He quieted her objections, and the current between them faltered.

It was dammed somewhere. A deep pool, a quiet surface was what he presented to her. The closer she looked into it the more frightened she became. Right here, every day, under her nose, somewhere along the way, Mark had been defeated. What he hoped for now was that she would not be.

She tried to shake this notion out of her head, but it was lodged there.

"We'll buy a bottle of cough medicine. It would be good for you."

"Sure."

"Monday I'll ask for an advance. Then on the way to school, we'll buy it. In fact I've got a wonderful idea. Why don't we cut school? We haven't done that for a while, and you could meet Mr. Osborn. We could spend the whole day at the church."

"We decided, remember? that it's better if I stay in the background. It's important you don't get off on the wrong foot with Mr. Osborn. Don't ask him for an advance. We've got to see how it goes."

"You know about these things, Mark," she acknowledged. "I would have ruined everything before I started."

They ended laughing.

But the laugh trembled through her as she tossed in bed that night, trying to define thoughts that were shadowy and skitterish, jumping toward suppositions, retreating in rout, disorganized, fearful. She kept running into a boulder. The size and shape of the boulder seemed to change, depending on the direction from which she attacked it.

The next day marched with aggravating slowness toward the three o'clock dismissal bell. Liberated, she raced down the street toward St. Anne's, past Nedick stands, taking in the smell form the Automat, sniffing French fries. She was always hungry, in fact ravenous. Another time she would have dwelt on the food, not today. Today the actual thoughts that limned her mind were in the new-old form . . . sound.

At the steps of St. Anne's she paused, intimidated by the scale of the building. The imposing entrance, flanked with multiple jambs. The stone soared, carved saints looked upward. How did one carve stone? If stone can spread its wings, anything is possible. Even that she be standing here.

. . . Your heart shouldn't race like this if you are going to sing. *Remember who you are,* she said, using Mark's formula. Benedickta

Roland climbed the stairs. The tones of the organ welcomed her. "Jesus, Joy of Man's Desiring."

She walked down the aisle toward the nave and stationed herself beside Mr. Osborn. Her throat opened and the music in her joined with the peal of the organ. Mr. Osborn played through to the end. "Very good, Benedickta. But I will not waste time with compliments. There is much to do. Today we work. Are you agreeable?"

She nodded, liking his courtly, old-world speech.

"To begin with, the way you *think* about the sounds you produce affects their shape, tone and color. That's reasonable, isn't it? Your voice, Benedickta, is a well. A deep and round well. The vowel is the bucket we bring it up on. Now, relax your tongue, jaw forward. You might think of the tongue as the rudder of a ship, keeping you on course. When it lies flattened, your tones are lower. When you furrow it by raising the sides, the tone brightens. I want you to imitate this vibrating burr that I am about to demonstrate. Now, with a relaxed mouth, tongue and glottis." He went up the scale producing a peculiar intonation.

She imitated it.

"No. You're pinching the sound. Don't you hear?"

She tried again.

"Too hollow. Listen. And again."

This time she performed to his satisfaction. "We will increase the burr to a buzz. This brings the sound forward where it can resonate in the frontal areas of your face. Practice this buzz with raisins in your mouth. The orator Demosthenes used the same method with pebbles, to correct a speech defect."

An hour flew by. Mr. Osborn said reluctantly, "I must discipline myself where you are concerned. We must not tire the young instrument, but take all things slowly. I see that not only do you have a remarkable voice, but are quick, very quick to learn."

"But I haven't sung yet," Benedickta objected.

He smiled. "Don't worry, we will get back to the singing. When we do, you will know what it is you do to produce each note, and where it lies in your body."

She nodded, feeling unexpectedly exhausted.

"Now." Mr. Osborn left the organ bench for a pew and seated himself somewhat arthritically. "Sit a minute with me. Benedickta is a beautiful name. You know it means blessed?"

"Yes."

"You must have been a great blessing to Alexandra Roland."

"A mixed one," Benedickta said.

"Tell me a bit about yourself."

"There's my brother, Mark. He's going to come by and meet you when he can. I told him about you yesterday."

"Mark's older than you?"

"Two years. We're Scotch twins. That means I was born on his birthday."

"I see, you were saving of birthdays, that's the joke." Mr. Osborn appeared delighted by this. "And you live near St. Anne's?"

"Yes. . . ." She avoided giving him details. And that pride and that decision were what killed Mark. She knew it later.

What judgment, she asked herself through a thousand nighttimes, can a fourteen-year-old be expected to have? Logically, none. But logic was no excuse. She never forgave herself.

"School play? What school play? Why should they want you in a school play? You can't be in no play, you got responsibilities . . . what are they at that school, crazy?"

Benedickta entrenched to wait it out. She could have withstood an army of Mrs. Beldens.

Finally Mrs. Belden settled the matter. "As long as no chore suffers on account of it. If you want to be up past midnight, that's your lookout."

Mark was amazed at the victory. Benedickta was not. Studying with Mr. Osborn and being a singer was what she was going to do. It seemed to her simple, the path straight.

Mark had new respect for her. He often looked at his sister as though seeing past her. It was a future he was reluctant to tamper with. He steadfastly refused to go with her to St. Anne's. There was enough grumbling over "the school play." He didn't want to fuel the situation by also being late. So he continued his truck route, with Belden at one end of a load and himself at the other.

The ten dollars Benedickta looked forward to did not materialize at once. Where music was concerned, Mr. Osborn was a perfectionist. Had Benedickta asked, or had he realized the situation, he would have pressed the money on her. As it was, it didn't occur to him to pay her until she sang. For six months it was "Think from your

toes, that will get you on top of the mountain. Now a swift glissade. You are flying, cascading over ice, effortlessly. No, no, again. Start with the click I showed you, that will give it to you."

The young voice soared.

"You hear the difference? You hear it? And we haven't started yet. We haven't begun to touch what is there."

Teaching for Harry Osborn was an intellectual parenthood. As a young man he had studied voice, but his retiring personality had prompted him to shelter behind an organ. However, he understood the preparation that was needed. Benedickta's singing was somewhat wild but her sounds riveted him. He was awed by the occasionally brilliant sparks his patient efforts sent ringing and flying.

"All vowel production must become habit," he explained. "You must eliminate *AY*. A true *AH*, on the other hand, opens the epiglottis. There is great energy and strength in a solid *AH*. In fact, I would say that *AH* is the scale on which to measure the power of your tone. *EE* takes a high position close to the palate. But it is not a pleasant note. It draws all the muscles and tendons of the nose and cheeks. Try it—you see. And the nostrils distend, as does the fauces, as though pulled by rubber bands. Now, if you are ready, I will introduce you to *OO*."

"How will I ever remember all this when I sing?" Benedickta asked despairingly.

"You won't. But when you have practiced correctly over a period of time, your body will."

Harry Osborn could no longer withstand Benedickta's constant demands that she be allowed to sing. "Adoramus te" was selected. "Anchor your first note. That is very important, then you can spin it out. Easily, easily. You must always feel you can go higher, give each piece a glory finish."

Benedickta was bemused by the music. She thrust her voice tentatively and then with new sureness against the scalewise passages, feeling a flexibility as it responded. She was never sure just where she would end up. But she began to learn what it was she must listen for, what position brought that added resonance and sparkle.

An opening at the Metropolitan could not be more exciting than the morning Benedickta Roland sang at the First Episcopal Church of St. Anne's. She came an hour early with Mark, who sat in the back row, refusing to meet Mr. Osborn until after the concert.

The final run-through began. Mark couldn't believe what he heard. Benka's voice had so many textures. It glanced with a golden sound and swelled to new fullness.

The congregation began filing in. Benedickta withdrew to the sacristy. Mark tried to set it all in balance—the poverty, the wearing away of his health, the blood he had been coughing, carefully hidden in a handkerchief—against what he heard. He totaled it, and looked dispassionately at the tally.

The minister developed and concluded his sermon. A young dark-haired girl walked across the chancel and took up a position on the steps. Confidence dissolved in Mark. His sister looked fragile and alone in the sudden hush. She stared in front of her with blank eyes. Mark's heart beat two for one until the first note. The walls sent back open ascending parasols of unfurled sound. Her voice called: a thousand people responded. Certain of the notes were muffled, the voice like a vein of ore was flawed, there were breaks that did not connect yet, some notes were not pretty, but they were compelling, tinged with such excitement that the congregation was lifted into the music. When the last pianissimo died away, it was into a silence that continued second by second. The audience was not ready to be returned to themselves. Mr. Osborn came forward. "Next week Miss Roland will sing again."

They must be satisfied with this. Benedickta walked down a side aisle and slipped into the back pew beside her brother. The spell she spread fell not only on the audience, but on herself. It was a spell that was to last all her life.

"I wish Mother could have been here," Mark said.

She laid her head against his. "I was marvelous, wasn't I?"

"Yes, Benedickta."

It was the first time Mark had used her full name.

After the service and closing hymn, people thronged about her. They congratulated, hugged her, shook her hand, wanted to talk. Mark watched her move through this human sea with the courtesy of a queen. Where and when had she prepared for this? He knew the answer was . . . always.

She did not allow herself to be deflected, she had looked forward too long to Mark meeting her teacher.

Harry Osborn shared the triumph, he also was swamped by well-wishers and those wanting to know how he had discovered this

young talent. He disentangled himself and drew Benedickta and Mark into his cubbyhole of an office. "So you're Mark," he said, his tortoise head prodding forward not to miss the nature of the boy. What he saw disconcerted him: a tall, slender youngster with fever in his cheeks. There was a strong resemblance to Benedickta, a sort of gypsy beauty. "I'm sorry the rest of the family couldn't attend."

Mark let it go by. If Benka had invented a family, that was no business of his. And she was right, there was no need for outsiders to know their circumstances.

Mr. Osborn took Benedickta's hand. "It was marvelous, truly marvelous. But you and I know it wasn't perfect."

"I was too tight," she said. "I didn't slide down the mountain."

"Exactly. But your audience didn't know that. Not one of them. That's charisma, that extra God-given quality. No teacher can impart it. It belongs to you."

"Next Sunday I'll do it perfectly."

Mr. Osborn smiled. "Probably not. I hope neither one of us is ever satisfied. Now, shall we all go for lunch somewhere? My treat. And of course . . ." He slipped ten dollars into her hand. The eager way she clutched it did not escape him.

He took them to a small cafeteria nearby and watched in disbelief as they filled their trays. Certainly they could not have eaten today and still put all that away. Intimation crowded his mind. He began to probe, realizing he should have done so more thoroughly and much earlier. "I know, of course, of your mother, Alexandra Roland's, death. About six years ago, wasn't it? You make your home with your father?"

Benedickta spoke up. "No. We live with some people, a family."

"The relatives you spoke of?"

She shook her head. "Just a family."

Mr. Osborn had been so obsessed by the voice that he had failed to ferret out the conditions of her life. But the brother had the look of a consumptive. Fear for Benedickta almost stifled him. "Tell me about it."

Mark intervened, assuming a light tone. "It's what you guessed, Mr. Osborn, a social welfare agency placed us. We've been in and out of foster homes. It was touch and go, getting them to take two of us. Benka cried convincingly over the desks of judges and matrons, and I made speeches about family cohesion, and we've been

at the same house almost three years now."

"But the home itself . . . ?" Mr. Osborn tried not to appear appalled.

Mark shrugged. "They're pretty much alike."

Mr. Osborn cleared his throat. "Benedickta gave me to understand . . ."

"Benedickta sometimes romances."

Mr. Osborn began again. "As a church organization, we have certain affiliations. I don't want to stick my oar in, but if you wished, I could perhaps see that other arrangements are made."

"Would you?" Benedickta leaned toward him across the table. "Oh, would you?"

"Benka, you're giving Mr. Osborn the wrong idea. It isn't that the Beldens mistreat us. They're victims themselves."

"Well, *I* think they mistreat us. What do you think ironing ten shirts is, and then having to wash up a whole day's mess of dishes because there isn't a clean utensil or pan to start dinner with, and being expected to keep track of all those kids, and getting yelled at for your trouble. Besides all that hauling you do. You're exhausted, worn out and half sick."

"Shut up, Benka." His illness was an entering wedge. If anyone called the health authorities, they would swoop down on him. It would mean being sent somewhere for treatment and Benka would be alone. For Mr. Osborn's benefit, he added, "Don't mind Benedickta. It's part of being a great performer, this tendency to dramatize."

"Am I dramatizing the rats, or the mess, or the smell, or the hours we put in?"

Mr. Osborn was visibly upset. "But surely the juvenile authorities . . . ?"

"We don't tell them," Benedickta burst out. "We've never told them because there is always the chance that next time they'd separate us, place us in different homes."

"But that's out-and-out blackmail." Mr. Osborn was aghast.

Mark pushed back his food and stood up. He wondered what kind of cocoon Mr. Osborn had lived in for sixty years. "Mr. Osborn, I appreciate what you're doing for Benka. But I've weighed everything carefully and I know what's best. We're okay as we are. So I'd like to leave it at that."

Mr. Osborn was completely nonplussed. "But surely . . . ?" He

didn't know how to proceed, or in what manner he had offended Mark.

"Come on, Benka."

She sat stubbornly where she was and would not get up. Her brother waited for her. "Benka?"

She shook her head.

His waiting became insistent. Benedickta was unmoving, frozen. She watched Mark walk away.

She had let him down, and yet she knew she had not. "He's sick," she burst out.

"I can see that."

"I'm going to buy cough medicine." She looked into Mr. Osborn's glasses at a reflected world. "It won't help, will it?"

Mr. Osborn was uncomfortable. "How long has he had that cough?"

"A long time. A year."

"He needs a doctor. He needs rest."

She knew that. That was one of the things she'd known forever. Suddenly it seemed best to speak Mark's fears. "Would they put him in a hospital?"

Mr. Osborn answered carefully. "It may be where he belongs."

"That's what he's afraid of."

"Things are different now, Benedickta. You wouldn't be alone. There is a church organization, you could be placed privately with one of our parishioners. In fact, if they would give you into the custody of an old bachelor, I would be glad to share my home with you and Mark, when he is well. My niece looks after me, keeps house. I was about to describe her as my sister's child. But then I realized you might expect a young person. It's hard for me to remember that Emma is well past thirty. She's a good woman, and would coddle you to death, I'm afraid."

"Mr. Osborn, you're not going to tell the health authorities?" It was not really a question, she asked for reassurance.

"I have to for both your sakes."

Benedickta could not believe this bland, unapologetic betrayal. She jumped up, knocking over a cup and clattering the silverware together. "I'll never come to the church again. And I'll never sing again." She turned from him to hurry after her brother. "Mark! Mark!"

She ran until she overtook him. "I'm not going back to the

church, Mark. I'm not going there again."

Mark stopped where he was and leaned against the side of a building. He dug his nails into the brick. "You could see what he was getting at. He'll report me. They'll put me away someplace. Then you'd be dependent on him. And what do I know about him?"

"I'm not going back, Mark."

"Benka, I have to tell you." He shrank against the cement wall, huddled in on himself. "I don't feel good. I haven't felt good all week."

"It's all right, Mark. I'll get you home." Sensible words were coming out over the panic. She listened to herself . . . no one could detect that panic was the tonic chord. "I'll say you have bronchitis. You're allowed to be sick once in a while. Even Mr. Belden had a cold and stayed home a week last winter, remember? You'll go to bed. And I'll buy the medicine. Then we'll think what to do."

"Okay," he said. It was all he had breath for. The coughing started. This time she saw the blood. *Agnus dei qui tollis* . . . the words from the B-minor Mass rushed through her mind. Lamb of God, who washes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us. They had reached the apartment and she tried to get up the stairs without being seen. Mrs. Belden blocked their way. "What's this?"

"Mark doesn't feel good. He has a cold."

"Well, he better be right tomorrow. Mr. Belden has a heavy day."

"He won't be up to it. I'm going to see that he has a few days' rest."

"Oh, you are, are you?"

"That's what he needs, then he'll be as good as new." She spoke brightly, smiled reassuringly, and Mrs. Belden, half convinced, grudgingly let them pass.

Mark lay on his child's cot that was too short for him and shivered under the single blanket. Benedickta brought him hers. She went out for cough syrup, bread and real butter, and bananas, all of which she hid in the room. She snitched sugar from the kitchen and they had an extra meal. It was delicious, cold milk over sugared bread and butter. Mark seemed to feel better afterward. He fell asleep and she stayed beside him, sleeping on and off.

In the morning Belden stuck his head in and ordered Mark up. "You've got a man's day to put in. You can't give way to every little thing."

"Not today, Mr. Belden." She had stayed in the room Mark

shared with the other boys. Terror at his collapse gave her courage to nod off with Reggie in the room, it gave her courage to outface Belden. "He's sick, can't you see?" When she yelled "cow bitch" at her stepmother she hadn't looked as wild and disheveled.

"Damned gypsy brat," Belden muttered, but he backed out. She had won a reprieve.

Her brother's body seemed stoked by some unnatural fuel. He turned his head from side to side and blood gushed from his mouth, soaking the canvas cot.

"Mark, you're really sick. The Beldens will get in touch with the health authorities by tomorrow anyway. It would be better, much better, if Mr. Osborn does it."

He didn't hear her. He didn't hear her, but she had decided. She began to plot it out. To save time she would take the bus. This meant getting the five-dollar bill which was pinned inside her sweater. She went into her room for it, the room she shared with the other girls, ranging from age four to herself.

She stopped in the doorway. Reggie was there. He had no business to be there. He had Jenny, the four-year-old, on the changing table. Her pants were off and he was looking, prodding and poking with his forefinger. Jenny was laughing and wriggling. On the changing table, laid out with surgical precision, were a pencil, a candle stub and scissors.

Benedickta never had contact with anything that felt like this before. Her blows sank in. It was hitting a pillow, the texture disgustingly soft, a mountain of flab. She screamed hysterically as she battled. There was no resistance. Reggie covered his face and cried until Mrs. Belden pulled her off. Benedickta struck her too, only to be slapped almost senseless. "Have you gone crazy?"

"No!" Benedickta screamed. "I've *been* crazy!" and she attacked Mrs. Belden, scratching, kicking, pulling her hair. She was knocked into a corner and slugged to her knees. Mrs. Belden stood over her, panting.

"He was molesting Jenny," she gasped.

"You're a lying little bitch!"

"He was! He was!" More blows on her head and face.

"All right," Benedickta cried, "all right."

"Admit you're a lying bitch, say it." She raised her hand.

"I admit it . . . everything."

"Lying bitch, say it."

". . . Lying bitch."

"That's better. Now keep out of my sight. And tell your lazy, good-for-nothing brother he better be on the job this afternoon."

Benedickta pulled herself to her feet when Mrs. Belden left. She got the five dollars and, stumbling out of the room, crept down the stairs.

Mr. Osborn had just finished rehearsing the choir when he looked up and saw her. "Benedickta!" He gave her a glass of sherry in his office.

It was marvelous to snuggle down between sheets, real percale sheets. And to have Emma tell her, "There, now, you can sleep knowing your brother is no longer in that place, that he is being looked after properly. Believe me, Harry left no stone unturned. The welfare people are on the carpet. Even that poor creature, that Reggie, is where he belongs. You can sleep knowing it's all for the best."

"For the best. For the best." The words rang through her head. In the morning she woke still holding to them. It took a moment to orient herself, figure out where she was, and about Mark.

Under the auspices of St. Anne's, Mark was admitted to a church-affiliated hospital where tests were run and diagnosis made. Benedickta was not allowed to see him. "Not for the time being" was the way Harry Osborn put it. So for the time being music was her refuge.

Endlessly she repeated and perfected phrases. Sometimes when she looked at Mr. Osborn's spotless home and the food heaped on her plate by Emma, she thought she had betrayed her brother. Mr. Osborn assured her she had probably saved his life.

Each day she asked, "When can I see Mark?"

Each day the answer was "Soon." She had almost come to expect it. She had been staying with Mr. Osborn and Emma three weeks when Mr. Osborn said, "He hemorrhaged in the night. I can't lie to you, Benedickta."

"Will he die?" She spoke the word without emphasis . . . apples, bananas, death.

"They are hopeful," Mr. Osborn said guardedly.

"That means he'll die," she said, translating for herself.

"It's advanced. But it can sometimes be turned around. There are new treatments, new therapy, new drugs. He is young, he has stamina."

"Yes, he is young." She walked out of the house. Emma called after her.

"Let her go," Harry Osborn said.

Benedickta was used to walking until things came right. But always with Mark. Mark beside her. Mark to talk to. She talked to him now. Deep in her head the conversation developed.

"I had to, Mark."

"It was more important to stay together, Benka," he argued.

"But you would have died. There was all that blood."

"I'm going to die anyway."

The current ran between them, swift. "Fight, Mark. Fight! I'll put my strength into you. Fight with my strength too." But the current broke into feeble eddies. She felt angry. It was as though he had put up the old sign JKKE FORSTYRRES. She wanted to take hold of him and shake him. Mark was part of her. Mark interpreted the world for her. A world without Mark was unthinkable. Didn't he understand that?

He was transferred to a sanitorium, and another two weeks passed before she saw him. A floor nurse tied her into a stiff white gown and fastened a surgical mask over her nose and mouth, cautioning her not to touch him, "not even the bedding." They were protecting her against Mark.

Mark was not in bed. He was sitting in an easy chair, reading. He looked rested. He laughed when he saw the gown and mask. "Have you come to operate on me, Benka?"

"Well, I will if you don't do everything to get well fast so you can get out of here."

"Why should I get out?" he teased. "I've got it made."

"I can see that. You look well already."

The remark brought a pause. "You don't go by that. You go by shadows on X rays."

"They'll get better too. But it won't be like before. Mr. Osborn is great. I think he's a saint. Emma's nice, but she fusses. It's kind of strange to have someone fuss over you, to come running after you if you forget your sweater. Things like that."

"How's the singing coming?"

"I work all the time. That is, Mr. Osborn will only let me sing an hour, but then there's study. He's teaching me piano. I pick it up pretty fast. I guess a lot comes back from when Mother taught me

and when I used to fool around at school. I'm learning Italian, German and French. I'm going to a parochial school now, run by St. Anne's. It's fantastic. You get to pick things you like, to do special work on. I chose the history of music." She told him the anecdote she had prepared. "It's about de Pachmann, the famous pianist. He had these stubby little fingers. They moved like mad, of course, just flew over the keyboard. Anyway, after he gave a Liszt concert, some lady came backstage. 'Mr. de Pachmann, I don't know how you do it with those—' Well, I guess she didn't exactly say, 'those short, stubby fingers,' but he got her meaning. De Pachmann looked at her, you can guess what kind of look, and said, 'Madame, whatever gave you the idea you play the piano with your fingers?' "

Mark liked that. She knew he would. They laughed together. Then he grew quiet and finally said, "Benka, they don't tell me anything. They just smile those hearty smiles well people smile at sick ones. When I ask, they tell me I'm making good progress. What I want to know, *is it true*? I don't even care very much. I just want to know. I mean, you can face anything if you know what it is. I oscillate in my own mind. Sometimes I think I'll be living with you and Mr. Osborn, and sometimes I think that's a lot of bull they're feeding me. I figured you'd tell me."

"You're going to live, Mark. You're going to come back and live at Mr. Osborn's house just like I said."

"Is that what you hope? Or what you know?"

Her hesitation was almost imperceptible, but he said quickly, "Okay, Benka. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. We'll wait and see what those shadow pictures do. Say, remember when we used to make shadow pictures on the wall? I can still make *Tyrannosaurus rex*."

"And I can still make a rabbit."

The visit blended with others. They let her come twice a week. She kept thinking, He could have stayed in Larchmont with Laverne and Darlene. No hauling there. The only thing he'd carry would be packages from the market. He would have played softball, gone to Friday-night movies, flirted with girls. Good food, wholesome food and plenty of it. That would have kept him well.

It was apparent which way it was going. The flesh seemed carved from his frame. His cheekbones jutted, his wrists were all bone and knob, the clavicle stood out and could be traced in his open-throated

shirt. But a strange thing happened, the tormented look left his eyes. His thoughts no longer seemed to run on death. He became cheerful and made plans, detailed plans that broke her heart. He wanted a vacation, and they debated whether it should be the mountains, or by a lake or at the beach somewhere.

"I guess we'll have to wait until you're a diva with the Met, then we'll go to Cortina."

She clapped her hands. "And drink hot mulled wine, spiced with nutmeg and cinnamon."

"Don't forget the skiing. We'll take instruction. I'll become a downhill racer."

Next visit she brought tourist brochures which he pored over. "Cortina when you're famous. But I think our first vacation should be California." He wrote the Fresno Chamber of Commerce and collected more folders showing mountain lakes, pine forests and even redwoods. "It's beautiful," he said, and chose Lake Huntington with steep wooded sides.

She was in church practicing with Mr. Osborn when the note stuck in her throat. She sat down beside him on the bench and laid her head on the keyboard.

Mr. Osborn didn't try to comfort her.

"He's dying. Mark's dying."

"Yes."

"But a month ago he was gloomy and prepared for the worst. Now he's so, I don't know . . . happy, looking forward. Doesn't he know? All he has to do is look at himself to know. He's making plans, Mr. Osborn. We're going to Lake Huntington in California. He's picked out the cabin and wants to send a deposit."

"The end is very close, Benedickta. And sometimes it is like this. It's a blessing when it is. The dying person becomes euphoric, confident, and then . . ."

She lifted her head and gave him a hard, composed look. "*And then* . . . that's where we're at, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"I can't live without Mark, Mr. Osborn. I don't want to."

"It will be very hard."

"Not very hard, impossible." She got up and packed her music in a stack. "I won't be singing anymore. When Mark can't even breathe, how can I sing?"

She saw Mark once more. She didn't know it was the last time. He was in bed. "Just a cold," he told her. "Did you reserve cabin number three?"

She looked right at him. "Yes." She could see the vein throbbing in his temple.

"I think it's the best choice. It fronts on the lake."

"I like it best."

"And there are boat rentals. I checked. A canoe, that's what I'd like, just to slip through the water."

As she was getting ready to leave, he stopped her. "I heard an interesting story about the pianist de Pachmann—" And he told the anecdote back to her, completely forgetting where he had heard it.

She laughed with him, but it started to get out of control.

"Shut up, Benka," he told her just as he used to. "There are sick people here."

She nodded and somehow got to the other side of the door, where she stumbled into the wall. Mr. Osborn guided her downstairs.

The phone rang at ten o'clock that night. Mr. Osborn said, "Thank you." He came upstairs and knocked on her door.

"I know. Mark." The tears were gone, the grieving had been done. "Sit with me a while, Mr. Osborn."

He moved a chair to the side of the bed and took her hands in his.

"There's a funny story," she said, "about the great pianist de Pachmann." She told it to him.

He forced a laugh. "You don't play it with your fingers. That's good. That's good." This was a girl you couldn't comfort. The best you could do was sit beside her.

At the funeral people from the past appeared, friends of Mark's from the Larchmont days, most of the Park School's softball team and, unbelievably, her father, Laverne, a seven-year-old Darlene, a four-year-old boy, and a squirming bundle her somewhat broadened stepmother carried in her arms.

Her father crossed the lawn and several grave sites. "Benka, you must understand. There was nothing I could do. I know you thought I forgot you, you and Mark. But I didn't, ever. There was just no way I could help. . . ."

"Except yourself. You went crawling back to her."

"Benka, I've never been able to do what I wanted for you. But that's my boy lying there. Please . . . I got trapped. You're too young, you can't know. But I always wondered, I always hoped, I thought someday . . . I never imagined Mark . . . God knows, a man's son is part of him. . . ."

Her pupils contracted to vertical slits. "In the beginning he said you'd write. Then he had to stop saying it. Do you know what he called you? 'That bastard,' not Father, but 'that bastard.' "

"Benka, don't do this to me."

"No one dies of tuberculosis anymore. Only if you don't have enough to eat and are worked to death."

"But a person has to believe . . . a person has to hope . . . I kept telling myself that you were together . I knew I couldn't come to see you and then walk away again. You were getting older . . . and . . . Mark was . . . Mark was . . . oh, my God, what have I done?"

She watched his tears. But what were tears when you had seen

blood? Her singer's voice rang out its attack. "You killed him, that's what you did. You killed Alexandra Roland's son to have more children with the cow bitch."

"For God's sake, Benka."

"I don't want you here." All heads were turned, everyone was looking at them. "When they put Mark in the ground I don't want her, or you, or those three here."

Harry came over. "Perhaps you and your wife better wait at a distance, Mr. Roland."

Steven Roland compressed his lips and walked to his wife's side. After a short conference they retired a few yards.

"I killed him too," Benedickta said. Emma took her hand. She didn't notice. "It was me she didn't want. Mark could have stayed. But he never considered it. I mean, for him there was no decision. You know what he used to say to me? 'Shut up, Benka.' He always said it in the same way. He never said 'dear Benka,' not ever. Mark wouldn't. He never said things like that. He didn't have to, did he? He died because he loved me. And so did Mama."

The parishioners of St. Anne's arranged that the casket be covered with flowers. A workman started to turn a crank. Benedickta averted her eyes and saw a small clump of bright dandelions on the grass. She picked two, one a white puff, the other golden with life. She went forward and placed them side by side on top of the coffin. She had to get on her knees and reach down into the ground. . . . Here we are, Mark. You and me. Remember when we used to blow on the dead ones to see what time it was? It won't be any time until the golden one is sleeping with you. Pity the golden one, Mark. I pity her. . . .

She turned away. "I want an ice cream soda," she announced. She passed her father and his brood without a glance. At the drugstore she ordered Mark's favorite, chocolate with chocolate ice cream, and sipped to the bottom, where her straw made a piggish noise.

From that time it was music. That was what she had become, an instrument as much as a violin or cello. When she was seventeen the church raised the money to place her in a conservatory. She continued to sing at St. Anne's and practice with Harry at the organ Sundays. But now she lived with other music students. It was an unsympathetic peer group, the competition keen for in-house solos, parts and prizes.

She was not coaching with Harry any longer, but with tough professionals. "Take the cork out of your mouth," she was told, "who knows, it may be champagne." Benedickta tried, with the distinct feeling it was not champagne. Mr. Amotage, director of Opera Workshop, shook his head. "What are you going to do with all that breath? What are your plans for it?"

Benedickta stared back at him.

"Well, if you don't know, don't take it. Again!"

Again! Again! How used she grew to the abrupt command. The voice, shot through with brilliance, was still immature, the quality uneven. She heard in her head what she wanted, but only sometimes succeeded in duplicating. Mr. Amotage was blunt. "We have not begun to attack your problems yet. We are still trying to define them."

She was eighteen and still a student, nineteen and a student.

From the beginning she had devised a way of maintaining the current with Mark. Not maintaining it exactly, but not letting it go. She kept his book *Surviving the Wilderness* under her pillow. It had been his one possession, the only thing left. When she needed to establish the current she read a section. It didn't matter which, how to recognize wild onions, how to guide yourself at night by the stars. She realized there were many different kinds of survival.

"There are three stages in achieving a perfect E. You must bring it front, allow it to resonate, and let it spread."

After dreary months of coaxing lighter, fuller, more textured notes, she endured a brutal session in which Mr. Amotage accused her of intellectualization and not internalizing. "Now it is time to stop thinking. If the tone itself does not by now come out relaxed, if the mouth, the uvula cannot resonate, or the breath control itself, I despair of you!"

On her twenty-first birthday she cried. How to locate water in the desert did not cheer her. The conservatory was a nunnery and she the bride of Music. She entered competitions and lost. Benedickta was not a good loser. But there was a new relationship with her voice. After four years at the school she was controlling her instrument. Great strengths could be called from it and delicate pianissimo modelings.

Auditions were difficult. In an audition you sang not to an audience, but to judges who weighed and measured each sound, con-

sidered its size, its shape, the ease with which it was arrived at. The consistency, the flexibility as you moved between registers, and something referred to as *presence* were important. This last was a great trial to Benedickta. The prevailing school of thought on presence was that the performer stood without motion or expression, these being qualities which belonged to the voice alone.

For her it was an impossible stricture. She was not a cello, a harp or a piano, but a young woman who felt keenly what she sang. Forgetting to keep her feet planted, she moved around. And the voice itself refused to stay within the bounds of official designations. The awards, the prizes offered by foundations and sponsors went to other aspirants.

Her life was geared to success. She had no choice. She must be successful. She must win. Each note was anchored in the blood of a soaked handkerchief. And in Alexandra Roland, who had not succeeded, who had not won.

She, Benedickta: It depended on her. She had been preparing this particular audition for months. But standing backstage, she wondered if she was to be dismissed once more as having "potential." She was so tired of that word. In a tennis match you can tell who wins . . . but in an aria? And the judges, twelve of them, like a jury, smug with power, and perhaps—she did not know—preferences: a throbbing contralto, an acrobatic coloratura, a pure spinto soprano, a dynamic mezzo? Who knew? And who knew which teachers of music they had talked to and which of the contestants they had been encouraged to look forward to? She was sure the auditions weren't rigged, but she was just as sure they weren't fair. It seemed to her unlikely that the prize of two thousand dollars would fail to her.

Two thousand dollars would mean a chance at Europe and the small opera companies where a new singer was given roles. She and Harry had been talking about Italy. He felt her student days were drawing to an end. After years of training, the problem was exposure and the opportunity to perform. She knew Harry had been saving his salary. But a church organist? It would take forever. She must do it herself. She went over the songs she had selected; a mental review was almost as helpful as vocalizing. She loved Mozart, and was opening with the aria "Come scoglio," sung boldly by Fiordiligi, in which she pledges to be firm in her devotion. The recitative was allegro, the mood fury and scorn—a contrast to the

second selection from *La Traviata*, "Ah, fors' è lui." Violetta interrupts her softly-spun introspective questioning, to defiantly proclaim herself "Siempre libera," always free. Was she limber enough, would the coloratura give her trouble? . . . "Relax," she commanded sternly, "stop worrying." She hunched her shoulders forward as Harry had taught her, releasing the tension. As for remaining stationary and impassive, she had devised a remedy for that. *Tubs of cement.* She would think of her feet as planted in tubs of cement.

The young singer performing onstage missed a note and broke into tears. In the midst of this confusion her name was called. "Benedickta Roland." Hysterics—what an act to follow!

She walked onto the boards. There were no footlights. That splendid curtain which cut off the sea of faces and gave privacy by its glare was not employed for auditions. A dozen granite faces looked at her from seventh row. They're tough, but they are an audience. Sing to them, she ordered herself. Pretend it is the church, Harry at the organ.

She sent her voice to the back of the auditorium. She forgot about cement, forgot to maintain a serene expression. The music possessed her. She moved with it, flowed with it. It poured from her. She sustained the last reverberating, full-throated note. Then inclined her head. Were the craggy ones impressed? Judges do not applaud. She began the recitative, andante—she felt in control; Violetta's deeply sad, foreboding lines floated. That was her solid *bel canto* training. She translated in her mind as she sang the poignant, troubled verses . . . *the one of whom I dreamed* . . . Andante pianissimo. Lyric, stolen time, *di sopra* . . . Then "Siempre libera," her voice flew to capture the magic of the sound. Tabby jumping to the windowsill. She mounted to a glory finish.

And in the sudden vacuum, shot a quick, appraising look into the auditorium. Someone said, "Thank you, Miss Roland."

Benedickta blinked angrily. She should stop wasting Harry's and the congregation of St. Anne's money. They were going to give the prize to the insipid soprano, reedy in her upper register, but who beamed afterward at the panel.

Benedickta was trembling. She had been good just now. When the music and the memories became one thing, something special happened. It had happened onstage . . . and in spite of it, the casual dismissal, "Thank you, Miss Roland." She leaned against a

pillar that was part of a set, trying to rally her defenses. I'd like to hear those arrogant, superior music masters do what I just did.

No ballerina worked harder or more hours to accomplish the perfect line, the absolute balance. No one was more cast down at any disparity between hoped-for and attained perfection. Nine working years lay behind today. She was twenty-three years old and she had not been chosen.

Perhaps listening was an art too. Had the judges trained for this moment of rejection? Who was she compared with and set against . . . what diva of the Met or La Scala? One thing she knew, they hadn't really listened. If only they had listened as they did at St. Anne's, allowing themselves to feel.

"Miss Roland."

She turned a black look on the person who addressed her. Who was he, that miserable tenor who failed to sustain his final note? No, unbelievably, it was one of the judges come from behind the impregnable position of theater seats. She steadied herself against the papier-mâché of the column because he had been pointed out to her, and because she had heard him conduct. This was the famous maestro Wolfgang Menetz. In the excitement of performing she had failed to recognize him, but now he stood before her, slender, somewhat dapper, his long hair combed to cover a sparse area.

She tried to collect herself, to hear what he had to say. "Miss Roland, the Larchnor award went elsewhere this afternoon. But I wanted you to know my vote was for you."

The inaccessible dark eyes regarded him intently, as though to draw out and divine the words before he spoke them.

"Your voice is an amazing instrument. The range is unusual. The top notes are positively disembodied, while the low register is . . ." Herr Menetz broke off. "Well, frankly, earthy." He shrugged slightly as though in apology for the word.

This was Wolfgang Menetz saying these things to her. "I predict a bright future, Miss Roland."

She wanted to thank him. But the maestro smiled briefly and strolled back to the group waiting for him.

*He had voted for her.* The great Wolfgang Menetz. "A bright future," that's what he said. *A bright future, Mark. A bright future, Mama.*

"A bright future," she told Harry on the phone.

"That's very good, Benedickta. Excellent, from a man like that. It's a fine contact. Perhaps he'll remember you."

"But I didn't win the Larchnor."

"There's always next year."

"Next year will be too late . . . for them. Next year I won't need them."

These outbursts never ceased to confound Harry Osborn, scintillating flak in which temper was indistinguishable from temperament —so removed from his own nature.

A week later Benedickta was asked to fill in on short notice for a benefit performance organized by the conservatory. When she heard that Wolfgang Menetz was contributing his services, she wondered if he had asked for her. The program was a pastiche of opera arias, the duet "In mia mano" from *Norma*, and from *Il Trovatore* Leonora's second act entrance, "Perchè piangete?" Her legato was perfect as she molded the phrase *"Degg'io volgermi,"* leading to the short quavers of the final *"E deggio—e posso crederlo?"* handling the acciaccaturas of Verdi's complex line with ease.

There was electricity between her and the audience. This was not a conservatory performance, but a downtown theater. These weren't parents. They were people. She let the tonalities brood darkly, then strung them rapidly as she had the buttons from the button box. When the line was done, she tossed it lightly into the air. She took three curtain calls.

Harry waited backstage and, each time she retired to the wings, whispered, "This is your night." Then, fearing his presence would keep the great of the music world from approaching, the old man retreated to watch from a distance.

The famous coach Madame Cecily came backstage. Her age was unguessable, forty was a possibility, sixty a probability. She was a minute, desiccated woman, whose face had been done by plastic surgeons so frequently its appearance was glazed. She dressed in originals and her ostentatious jewelry was real. Madame Cecily prepared the stars of the Metropolitan to face the acting demands of their roles. She said to Benedickta, "I haven't time for you. I haven't room. But give me a call." And pressed a card into her hand.

"You mean, you mean . . ."

"I mean I'm crazy, but I'll take you on."

"Madame Cecily, I can't believe it."

A huge diamond was waved in her face. "I haven't time. Goodbye."

Wolfgang Menetz came up to her. "I understand there's a party in progress at my place. Will you let me escort you?"

Benedickta hesitated. "I'm here with my teacher."

"Then, by all means, your teacher must come along." Harry was accordingly introduced. His bow tie, which Emma had patted into place, was askew. His face shone with perspiration and he was in a state of confused excitement, only half believing the triumph. He allowed himself to be bundled into a taxi, which was shared with the great conductor and several other people whose names he didn't catch. Benedickta squeezed in beside him; he marveled at her composure. Benedickta had stepped across an unseen threshold into the professional world of Music . . . and she belonged there.

An array of personalities mingled at Menetz's East Side studio, with its view of starlight, city light, and barge light. A diva who had just closed at Covent Garden pressed her hand, Loretta Ullman. Benedickta's color heightened, she had listened to her recordings so often. The party swelled around her, the room a swirl of color, laughter and celebrities. Waiters moved silently, proffering canapés and drinks. The maestro personally saw that her glass was kept filled. He introduced her to everyone. She was presented to Menuhin and his two sisters with extraordinary names that matched their extraordinary talents.

Menetz ran his finger around the rim of his wineglass and repeated an apothegm attributed to Horowitz: "When I don't practice one day, I know it. When I don't practice two days, my fingers know it. When I don't practice the third day . . . the audience knows it!"

Benedickta laughed. Wolfgang Menetz was the most dazzling person she had ever met. He knew music in an intimate way. He called Bach the foremost of the prophets, and of Chopin said, "His is music you want to run your hands over." She understood that he spoke to tell her of himself. "First things and last things," his voice intense, "that is what art is made of. You are a first thing."

She felt tumbling and spinning, partly with champagne and partly because Wolfgang Menetz spoke to her in this way.

"Benedickta Roland. You are an experience as an artist, and, I suspect, as a person."

He spoke of her as an artist. Had the metamorphosis occurred?

Was she finally able to project who she was and tell in music all the things that could never be said?

She thought Wolfgang Menetz original. "Art judges the individual. It is never the other way around." How did one respond to such a complicated man who had set himself the task of charming her? She remembered reading his vita on the back of a program. It stuck in her mind that he had conducted on five continents. "I'm forty-four years old," he said abruptly. "Does that strike you with horror, or as a fact of no consequence?"

Looking at him, she could see the forty-four years.

"You're not like anyone else, are you?" she asked.

"Neither are you."

Toward morning Menetz offered to take her to her student lodging. But she knew Harry waited on the periphery of the festivities. She could not deny her old teacher. Late as it was, he would want to go over the performance note by note, phrase by phrase. The triumph belonged to Harry as much as to her. She was on the other side of the looking glass where everything was the same yet touched with difference. She explained to the maestro that it was not possible for him to see her home. He accepted her verdict.

Harry had fault to find with her when no one else had. She failed to give full measure to an appoggiatura, at another point her pronunciation was unclear. "Always make words work for you. Some singers treat words as an impediment, but words give color. You must do them justice." She listened, nodded and promised to work harder. It was already light when she lay on her bed with closed eyes, her whole being turned inward. Her hand groped for the book under her pillow. She no longer had to open it, just touch it.

I'm not the person I've been, she told Mark. She must understand why. Frosted glasses, bubbling laughter, the excitement of having carried off her part, knowing she had sung well. And for the first time, the heady feeling of other people saying so, not just Harry and the teachers at the conservatory—everyone.

The night's success brought an end to her student days. Madame Cecily claimed her with a phone call. From that moment she was in complete charge. It was she who arranged for Benedickta to keep her room at the conservatory although she attended no more classes but prepared for the new work that lay ahead. The lessons took place at Madame's apartment. Benedickta stepped from the elevator into a museum. Luxurious with Persian carpets, lithographs, a

signed Picasso print, Carrara marble tables from Florence, inset sandalwood boxes, a pair of carved Oriental daggers, conch shells, grave pottery and handwoven wall hangings.

The great of the musical world paid homage to Madame on her walls—photographs signed with such names as Toch, Stravinsky, Piatigorsky, Tedesco, Rachmaninoff, dedicated music scores and framed reviews. Benedickta came forward hesitantly.

"Go back! Go back!" Madame screamed at her. "Back to the elevator and come in again. This time as though you owned the place."

Benedickta turned around, took a moment to collect herself and marched back in.

"That's better. That's the way you make an entrance, whether it's in the theater or a manager's office. Shoulders back, chest out. You have attractive full breasts, you should never hunch your shoulders forward and hide them. For the voice to be perfect, the body must be perfect. The entire body is the instrument. We will start by building up the body physically. Look at me, I am a runt. You, a strapping young woman, you should be able to knock me off my feet. But you can't do it." Madame took up a stance much like a dancer's with feet turned out. "Now, charge me. Try to upset me. Go ahead. With all possible force."

Benedickta propelled herself against the frail-looking frame, but it was she who went flying half across the room.

Madame grunted satisfaction. "Never mind, my dear."

Benedickta picked herself off the floor with fresh respect for Madame Cecily. The small, wizened figure was outlining a program of physical fitness to be embarked on immediately. "In the basement of this hotel is a swimming pool. I want you here at seven-thirty every morning. You will do forty laps. After which we will breakfast together. And from this moment to the end of your life as a singer, you are not to drink anything with ice. Ice causes a tension in the tissues. But I was speaking of your physical regimen . . . in the afternoons, horseback riding, weather permitting, and a stiff program of running."

"But the lessons?" Benedickta ventured.

"Lessons? *Everything* is a lesson. You must not become a machine for producing sounds, but an artist. We are going for a walk . . . now, around the apartment, but as though we were taking a stroll outdoors. You will sing the C major scale because you are happy to

be my protégée. *Allons!*" Madame set a stiff pace and Benedickta fell into stride beside her, singing, "Do, re, mi . . ."

"Enough, your voice is limber. That's all I need to know. My main challenge with you is to encourage a certain receptiveness." They left the ornate living room, marched along a hall and turned into a spacious study. Madame stopped and surveyed the room. "Look around you, my girl. Describe what you see."

This seemed easy, as a fireplace the size of King Tut's tomb dominated an entire wall.

"I see a massive fireplace . . ." She was not allowed to continue.

"A poorly chosen word, my dear. People always use it when speaking of fireplaces. It's like saying, 'panoramic view.' Avoid clichés. Instead, *look*. You might have guessed that every piece of furniture in this house has a history. The black leather ottoman I picked up in Gibraltar. I was there with my first husband. It's Arabic—the footstool, not my husband. And the Madonna and child, the Raphael triptych on the mantel, I found that— Well, never mind. This is to be a walk, not a tour. But all these inanimate objects are part of my disorganized, cluttered life." She glanced at Benedickta penetratingly. "One may disparage life, but not art. Art, *never*!" They stepped onto a balcony blanched in a dazzling sun. "Tell me what you see."

Benedickta was used to escaping into her thoughts. She didn't know how to turn them inside out for someone else's inspection. "It isn't so much the individual things I see. . . . It's the whole ugly, beautiful city."

Madame was unexpectedly pleased. "Yes, yes, it is the *whole*. We tend to cut things up into a sense of sight, sound, smell. But it's one experience. And you must learn to identify experiences. A clutter of objects, what is that? What we call *the day* is enormous space in and around and beyond. Reflect on this marvelous emptiness. It is what holds a composition together. It lies at the very center of music. It is the rests, the transitions, the tempi. Remember it was out of the void that God created the earth. And the void is all around us. Today it is brilliant, dancing with hidden tomorrows, full of sun and dust. It is important to feel it, react to it. You are not an artist only when you sing, but every moment of your life. You must do everything more intensely than other people. That's the function of an artist, to interpret the world, to show it new, different and alive." She scrutinized Benedickta closely with eyes

squinted. "Let me tell you what an artist does. She *takes.* Takes from the world. Appropriates everything, people, places, things." Madame paused to see how Benedickta was reacting to this. "You don't understand, do you? You think I'm a monster. A miniature monster perhaps, one who needs to be placed under a magnifying glass. But, my dear girl, you *give* so much! How can you *give* except by taking? You are here to take from me. And I will not be diminished by it. That's the way art works." She rapped the metal railing. When Madame said nothing further, Benedickta realized the lesson was over.

Another day Benedickta was given a reading list. "Great authors teach you to feel. Have you read Merezhkovski's *Leonardo da Vinci*? Of course not. There are fads in authors as in everything else. No one reads him. Just as no one reads Robert Louis Stevenson anymore. He is put on shelves for children. But he is one of the great writers. Do you know what he said to a man who was late for an appointment and gave as his excuse that he wasn't feeling just right? 'The work of the world is done by people who don't happen to feel just right that day.' Stevenson was consumptive, you know."

"I know," Benedickta said.

They were hiding in the heather from the Red Fox, the Campbell of Glenure, with only Mark's flashlight to see by, she interrupting him to ask, "Who do you hate more, Belden or Mrs. Belden?" . . . "I don't hate them." . . . Amazed, she asked, "Why not?" . . . "Because I don't think about them." . . . "Well, *I* think about them, every minute I'm doing that pile of shirts I think about them. Friday I ironed one shirt perfectly. Then I stuck a pin in it. A straight pin. The first time Belden raises his arm, he'll get it." Mark laughed. "That's as good a way as mine," he said, "of dealing with the problem."

Madame Cecily was still speaking. "Another neglected author is Kingsley. In *The Water Babies* there's that amazing scene where Tom, knowing all life in the sea emanates from Mother Carey, expresses wonder that she sits absolutely still, apparently doing nothing. Mother Carey's explanation is that she makes things make themselves. Which is what I plan to do with you, my girl. Make you make yourself."

The pace that had been set for her, physical, mental and emotional, was more exacting than Benedickta had ever known. She

looked up from it to discover a new mentor—or tormentor—had been added, Bernard Venuti. Benedickta thought of him as a genie emerged from an uncapped bottle. A bloated genie, who could never be stuffed back in. As puffy and gross as Madame Cecily was small and delicate, he was brought into the picture as her voice teacher. The heart of his technique was a recording device which he activated so that she could hear the improvement from week to week. Although it seemed to Benedickta that he delighted most in replaying her mistakes.

Benedickta was divided into body and breath. Madame Cecily had charge of the body, the physical exercises, the dancing positions that were a preliminary to mime, which in turn prefaced acting. Benedickta believed she had acted her roles at the conservatory; now she learned to melt into another identity. And she learned restraint. "If you feel that sorry for yourself," Madame Cecily snapped, "your audience will not have any sympathy for you." Emotion held down to burst out in song, this was the technique to master. The book she was given to study: Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares.*

In working on her first role under Madame Cecily, that of Leonora, she learned the interior Leonora. She was asked such questions as: "What did she read, do you think? Novels? What kind? . . . What did she have for breakfast? Does she enjoy food? What about sex? Does she think about it? The act itself? Will she enjoy it?"

The last question Benedickta pondered. She was almost twenty-four and virgin. In her junior year at the conservatory a young violinist sent her an impassioned note. She read it with interest; but not feeling equal to matching its high lyric style, she checked out of the library a volume containing the letters Nadezhda von Meck had written Tchaikovsky and copied one of them. This she sent to the violinist. Intimidated by such erudite ardor, he lowered his eyes when next they encountered each other. . . . Once a ragged boy younger than she, selling flowers on a street corner, pressed a camellia into her hand and said hurriedly, "I love you." She avoided that corner for months, and when she went there again he was gone.

This total lack of experience she felt was best not confided to Madame Cecily, who imagined because she was young, her sex life was rich. Although *when* she imagined her indulging in it, she

couldn't guess. Madame Cecily had not left an hour, not a half hour unoccupied.

Bernard was a chair chooser. He chose his chair with as much care as he would give to a major purchase. And it was a major purchase of his comfort, to which he gave considered thought. Once seated he signaled her to sing.

On a day she never forgot, his pudgy hands flew in the air. "Stop!"

What had she done?

Had she breathed?

Had she mixed her vowels? But it was none of these.

"I want that A to linger in my mind. It was perfect. A perfect texture. A lustrous pearl. I want it to lie in my mind and yours. Do not open your mouth again today."

Tears flooded Benedickta's cheeks. A compliment from Bernard!

Menetz, during this hectic three-month period, was on tour in South America. He didn't write, he didn't communicate, but he was there in the presence of Madame and Bernard. Benedickta knew that no one works for nothing. She wondered, between bicycle exercises on the floor and diaphragmatic breathing, just what role Wolfgang Menetz would play in her life. All her passion went into music; she wondered if there was enough left for a man.

However, there was indignity at being without a lover. Was she so undesirable? And it was time she knew sexual passion. How could she sing of it authentically if it passed her by? It amused her to speculate if she would be expected to "pay the price" when Menetz returned to New York. She rather thought she wanted to. But she didn't waste time thinking about it. Time was a luxury she didn't have. There was no longer time to sing at St. Anne's Sundays. She had to give it up. "Just for a while," she told Harry.

"Of course, of course. You must think of your career. You have an obligation to your talent, you must put that first."

She knew he sincerely felt this, but it didn't seem fair. For ten years he had fed, sheltered, nurtured her, been adviser and confidant. Now two strangers were appointed guardians of her future and Harry was shoved into the background.

The intensive grooming of the past months was climaxed by a phone call one morning. It was Madame Cecily. "No lessons today, my dear."

"Why not?"

"You are performing this evening. You must save your voice. I want you to vocalize now for forty minutes, and again at five o'clock. Eat lightly, and wear your floor-length black skirt. I'll pick you up at eight."

"But where am I singing? And what program?"

"You'll sing everything you know. Wolfgang Menetz is giving a soiree."

"He's back?"

"Oh, yes, he's back. He's been back a week."

"But . . ." She choked on words, tremendously disappointed, embarrassed by her fantasies, her willingness to pay the price . . . when he didn't think enough of her to telephone. It must be the voice he was attracted to.

She started her warming-up exercises, thinking again what a complicated man Menetz was. She broke off a trill to go into the bathroom and look at herself in the mirror. From a skinny, undersized girl she had grown into a tall, full-bodied young woman. Only the eyes remained the same. Mark's eyes. But while his were calm, hers held strange glints. They took the world into their black depths and juggled it around a bit. She still had more trouble with herself than any person she knew. Right now, for instance, her mind should be only on the program she was to sing, and suddenly Wolfgang Menetz was lodged there. Her first year at the conservatory she'd heard him conduct Verdi: *Giovanna D'Arco* and *Il Trovatore*. He was a magician, blending all, only to pull apart and schematize the texture, revealing skeins of emotion. His interest in her was inexplicable. He held himself at such a distance, like a master puppeteer, manipulating the strings that animated Madame Cecily, Bernard and her. Would it culminate tonight? Or was tonight a beginning?

The Menetz studio had been rearranged, chairs rented and a cupola set up over the bar. An audience of approximately fifty people were seated when she entered. Menetz came to her side immediately. "So nice of you," he murmured, as though this were not a command performance. "I have chosen a rather select group to hear you."

"But you haven't heard me yourself."

"No need. I've had reports. You have a fine accompanist for tonight. So let us hear what these last months of hard work have done." He pressed her hand, and with this encouragement she

stepped to the front of the room which had been cleared as a stage.

She began with "Mi tradi" . . . "He betrayed me." As always when she sang, Benedickta sloughed off the moment, like a lizard shedding a skin. She was Donna Elvira. At the same time she was back in her father's house. He was sitting on the edge of her bed, saying, "If things don't work out—if you ever need me."

She embarked on the second selection, "Salce, salce," the "Willow Song." The mournful lines of Desdemona's dreadful premonition she sang pianissimo—*put on the same bedsheets as on my wedding night.* . . . Desdemona had known just as she had known. "Shut up, Benka. There are sick people here."

The mood was set. They were ready for her Leonora, pale, worn, tormented—she asks her God for peace. "Pace, pace, mio Dio!" When she told of her love she described Mark. She didn't think about the portamento, the grace notes and rests. She didn't need to. She dropped to a mellow E flat. There was a new timbre in the low register, more facility in the leaps. Menetz stood at the back. She felt him there—and soared to a blazing climax.

She had captured the fifty. She could do no wrong. There was a call, "Brava!" She found herself surrounded, smothered in praise. Madame Cecily interposed her small bulk. "My dear, you did everything wrong and it was marvelous. You moved, you bent, you swayed, you gestured—you tumbled tradition and made it. These are patrons, colleagues, opera buffs—and I predict they will say all their lives, 'I was there—I heard her—*before.* . . .'"

Menetz didn't allow Madame to go on. He excused himself to his guests and escorted Benedickta to the room in the conservatory which she shared with two girl violinists. At the door he said, "To put things in perspective: tonight was a good night. We took a flyer on 'Pace, pace,' and you came through. But every night may not be as fortunate. The foundation must be firm. In another six months you will be ready. In the meantime, you may receive offers. I do not think you should accept them."

"I will do whatever you say."

"By the way, I am conducting a Stravinsky festival at Town Hall. You will attend rehearsals."

"Oh, that's wonderful."

"I hope it will be."

"Thank you. And thank you for tonight."

"When you know me better, you will find I only do things I want to do."

Menetz guessed correctly. Offers came. Houston was mounting a production of *La Forza del Destino*, and she was asked to understudy the lead. She was not allowed to accept. Casting was beginning for *Die Fledermaus*. The director of the Boston Opera would be interested in hearing her. She responded negatively through haughty letters drafted by Madame Cecily. And she attended rehearsals for the Stravinsky festival.

Entranced, she watched Menetz draw out the complementary orchestral sections. He emphasized the composer's disdain for ordinary musical passages. The modes warred one minute, to erupt with raucous humor the next. It seemed to her that many segments strove for dominance; like a general, Menetz held them in check, or coaxed masterfully until the structure stood stark.

As she sat alone for a week listening, the fine points of his conducting became clear. Wolfgang Menetz charmed, commanded and demanded, yet practiced the restraint of a great artist. At such moments he was another, but silent, instrument.

After rehearsal Menetz took her to parties, to musical soirees. In contrast to her austere student days, it seemed she had been lifted to a magic world. She loved to be seen, her arm on his. Everything sparkled, champagne, jewels, talk. Divas, impresarios spoke of La Scala, told anecdotes and were courteous to an unknown singer named Benedickta Roland, who, rumor had it, was a protégée of the maestro. Benedickta began to keep a diary. It was soon filled with the names of the great.

Harry worried. He was cut off from casual access to her. She relied now on other teachers. He came one day prepared to probe her relationship with Menetz. He had tried on several occasions to work the conversation around to what he wanted to say. But Benedickta pretended not to follow him. Finally he blurted out, "Wolfgang Menetz is a fine conductor, a fine musician. But he is a man of the world." That gentle word of caution was all he could muster. There was no one to tell her more; only this elderly church organist made a halfhearted, clumsy attempt. But it made her think.

Was she in love with Wolf? Or did she want to be in love with the great conductor? She had searched recently for Benedickta and found her absent. Benedickta had become an instrument, resounding

at will. Harry, the conservatory, Madame Cecily, Bernard and she herself had fashioned this rare and passionate voice. Passion—she remembered passion, the passion of Benka playing double solitaire with Mark, wanting to win, insisting her card lay under his, trying to slip it beneath the edge of his.

She no longer cheated. In music you couldn't. You had to work with precision. The beat, count, rhythm, score, lyrics, language, theory and production, all must blend to produce something electric.

They had called "Brava!" She relived that moment. But when she drew a sharp sight on herself only the voice was there in full view. As an instrument she was a near-perfect thing, vibrant and ready. As a person what had become of her?

On Wolfgang's opening night she sat in her usual seat, conscious of being privileged, of being special because he made her so. She sang the score in her head, watching, as with arms, shoulders and his entire body, he cleaved and entered the music. I'm mad about him, she thought.

Afterward Wolf took her to a below-street café he was fond of. They sat rather silently eating pasta, prawns and shelled mussels, downed with Chianti and freshly baked bread. Eating was the prescribed way of waiting out the night for morning reviews. The waiter was on the lookout and brought the first papers to their table. Benedickta, who had been nodding, was instantly awake. Pursuing the music section, she was the first to spot the notice.

A bad review. Benedickta was horrified. Biting, sarcastic remarks that amounted to an attack. Wolf reached for the paper, but she pulled back, and in a rush of words attempted to prepare and console him for what he was about to read.

Wolf extracted the newspaper from her fingers. "They've roasted me, have they?" Then, scanning the article, "It seems my velvet suit offended. A pity. I thought it rather an elegant touch."

"What difference does it make how you dress? It's no business of anyone's. Only the music, that's all that counts. You could wear a barrel and if the sounds are magnificent, what difference does anything else make?"

"If you will glance at the following paragraph, you will see that this gentleman of the press did not think the sounds magnificent." He cut off her protest. "Come, come Benedickta, a bad review? I've drawers overflowing with them."

His resilience delighted her. "So you don't need cheering up?"

"Perhaps I do. I find, for instance, that it is very satisfying to sit here by the hour and watch you continuously consume this meal. You are such an instinctual person. And on every level. You know, without my telling you, that the arts are expressions of the feast of life, that you taste painting, touch music, enter into religious fervor over poetry, inhale the perfume of dance."

"Do I? Do I know those things? It's you, Wolf. I don't know anything. All I can do is open my mouth. Either to stuff it, or to sing."

He took her hand, which was unusual with him. He rarely touched her. "Remember when I told you first and last things are important?"

She nodded.

"I said then our meeting was a first thing. By that I meant that it would come to have significance for me."

She looked and saw not the musician but the man. She understood that their relationship would change.

The booth was secluded, at the rear of the restaurant, and the waiter had gone home. The manager yawned at the bar, the other tables were unoccupied. Suddenly Benedickta found herself surrounded by Wolf, his person, his voice, his hands, especially his hands.

Her main feeling was surprise. "Wolf, behave."

"I am behaving. My God, young lady, for the first time in my life I have behaved with utter and complete probity. I am about to ask you to marry me."

She had come to know a great many aspects of the man. Wolf when he was charming, Wolf serious and instructing, Wolf being fun, making her laugh. Wolf deciding her future. She was somewhat disappointed that they had not become lovers. But a proposal of marriage was something she was unprepared for. "I'll sleep with you if you like," she said tentatively, "but I don't know if I should marry anyone."

He responded firmly. "You should marry me. Perhaps the deepest reason is that we share music. To me you *are* music." He examined her long black olive eyes. It was difficult to judge what lay at their center. "Would you rather hear me say I love you? Then you'll want an explanation of love. Poets from the time of the Greeks have tried and failed at that one. But to please you . . ." He took her hands between his. "Our worlds collided. Yours exploding into my sky a dozen suns where before there was only one."

"Yourself," she teased.

"Of course," he acknowledged cheerfully, "but don't be so hard on my maiden effort."

"Wolf, you're not serious?"

He seemed exasperated. "Do you think I want to marry every little voice student I meet? If I must dissect my feelings, I'd say we need each other. I need your freshness, your enthusiasm, your dedication to remind me of my own early discipline. Too often these days I find myself coasting, neglecting my work. This Stravinsky thing, you know, I've done it before. . . . And whether you realize it or not, you need me. I'll watch over you the way Harry used to."

Benedickta thought she detected condescension and bridled. "Everything is because of Harry. I couldn't sing a note if not for him."

"Of course. An artist needs the loving concern a Harry provides. But you need more. Exposure, the kind I can give you. You need the careful guidance I can provide. I won't allow you a role until you are ready for it. And when you sing, I'll be in the pit. It will be a joint creation, a marvelous sharing of ourselves and our art." This was murmured into her ear which he kissed and then bit.

The effect on her was surprising, an unpleasant shattering of her usual control. She slid away from him. "What are you doing?"

"Adoring you. And punishing you just a small fraction for upsetting my life."

She shook her head. "I don't think I understand you, Wolf."

"You understand me. I live for music. That is why we will be good together."

"And you've really thought about it? I mean, you *are* Wolfgang Menetz."

"I know who I am."

"Wait, let me finish. I'm not being humble. But you are known everywhere, world-famous. 'Potential' is the word they use about me. 'Maestro,' that is you."

"Even a maestro can be lonely, eh? Can love and desire? And recognize, as I do in you, the glory of a voice which I will foster. Give me your answer, Benedickta."

She looked surprised. "Did you think I would turn you down? Oh, Wolf, you are a funny person."

Benedickta went around immediately to tell Harry. He and

Emma were pulled from sleep so she could relate the proposal in detail, word for word. Perhaps it was because they weren't fully awake that they were unbelieving. Harry, in particular, seemed struck dumb.

With the second telling, Emma finally grasped the situation. "Such luck," she burst in, "to have caught his eye. The road will be smooth from now on. As his wife you are made, your future, everything!"

Harry was a spectator to this enthusiasm. Benedickta was forced to challenge him directly. "Well, Harry? What do you say? It's wonderful, isn't it?"

He looked at a spot somewhat northeast of her. "Are you sure he is right for you?"

"No, I'm not sure. How can anyone be sure?"

"I mean to say, he is a sophisticated man, and so much older."

"Are you trying to tell me he's had other women?" She laughed. "Oh, Harry."

"I don't know, of course," Harry continued doggedly, "but his reputation . . . one hears . . ." He broke off in despair at finishing any of the sentences he had begun.

"I do believe you are jealous, Uncle Harry." That note of levity introduced by Emma set things right.

"Of course he is. He wants to marry me himself. Admit it, Harry."

"That's it, that's it." Harry kissed her on the cheek and brought out a bottle of homemade wine. A previous batch had exploded in the basement. Toasts were drunk and Harry repaired to the piano. He began a rollicking polka. Benedickta grabbed the bony frame of Emma and gyrated madly. "Heel and toe—and away we go!" The cavorting, the commotion, the early morning wine and laughter reassured her.

A fine artist, a cultivated man, Wolf was certainly the most eligible bachelor in musical circles. However, during all the lunches and dinners that followed, in cabs, at parties, even in his studio, Wolf was not again physically aggressive with her. Except for the morning he proposed, he never kissed or fondled her—only her hand, in Continental fashion. Perhaps it was his age. But forty-four wasn't old, it was mature. She concluded he was restrained and considerate and she must be a bitch, because she wanted . . . that was as far as she ever got. She didn't know how to express what she wanted.

Wolf bewitched audiences simply by lifting his baton. And he bewitched her.

Then how explain her periodic bouts of panic, the instinct to run?

Flattering as it was, it was still not absolutely clear to her why he had chosen Benedickta Roland. What was clear, she was about to exchange the small shared room at the conservatory for an opulent life. She would be married to a celebrity and she couldn't picture what that life would be. No, that wasn't right. She knew what it would be, but not how she fit into it. To avoid such unsatisfying reflections she concentrated her energy on work. Bernard and even Madame Cecily were pleased with her. But for some reason she wasn't pleased with herself. Nor did she think Mark would be pleased with her. The book she had kept under her pillow for ten years was removed and put in her dresser drawer. She piled all her clothes on top of it.

When he picked her up for an evening now, Wolf invariably reported on the details of their wedding. He attended to everything himself, selecting the church, deciding the day. It had been two months away, and that seemed ample time to adjust to the idea. But suddenly looking up from an adagio molto, she realized that it was two weeks from Sunday. There had been a preliminary fitting with a dress designer Menetz called in. Benedickta took no interest whatso ever in the gown, the fall of the skirt, the darts at the waist. She resented the afternoon taken from her studies.

To make up for the incursion on her time she worked late the following day, and was going over a score when there was a knock at the door. Mimi Powell, the mezzo soprano across the hall, stood there. She did not know Mimi well. She didn't know any of the students at the conservatory well.

Once inside the room Mimi seemed embarrassed.

"Do you want to sit down?" Benedickta asked her. "Jan and Vicky are performing tonight."

Mimi Powell shook her head. "I came to see you. I know nobody gets thanked for butting in and I feel a fool now I'm here, but . . ." She spoke very quickly. "I hear you're going to marry Wolfgang Menetz."

"Yes." Benedickta half expected the usual congratulations, yet there was something in her manner . . .

"I wonder—" A measured determination brought out another

sentence. "I wonder if you know his reputation?"

Benedickta's heart jumped like a squirrel to a wheel. "As a conductor?"

Mimi Powell stood her ground. "That's not what I meant. He got a friend, someone I knew, into trouble and ducked out. I thought you'd want to know."

Benedickta shrugged. "Before he met me, I'm sure a lot of things went on. I don't inquire about them. After all, he's a bachelor, and a famous one. Women are always hanging around Wolf."

"Okay. If that's the way you want it. But I wonder if you really know what you'll be letting yourself in for. There are boys too. He's proud of it, he calls it being ambidextrous. He's a dissipated old goat."

"And you're the girl he ducked out on," Benedickta concluded aloud. Benka had been small, Benedickta kept on growing. She was tall, her diaphragm steel, her waistline expanded from many years of sustaining notes, so that her body was of one piece like a pillar. It was a powerful body for a woman to possess and she tensed it. "Get out of here fast, Mimi, because I'm going to sock you."

Mimi backed out. Benedickta walked up and down the room. Three steps took her to the end; she walked them repeatedly. Mimi's allegation caused a storm because it forced her to admit Wolf was an entity outside herself, and always would be. What did she feel for him? Affection? Admiration? Gratitude? Was that enough? Mutual interests? Was that enough? She was unable to drive out what had been said, yet unable to be perturbed about it. If she couldn't get upset over a thing like that, then she could no longer pretend to be in love.

She attempted to rationalize her lack of feeling. Was it such a terrible thing if he was attracted to boys? But then why marry her? Why even the brief fling with Mimi? She couldn't understand Wolf, but she was beginning to see *herself*. Madame Cecily said "take." Hadn't she taken much more, from the time she was Benka? Marrying Wolf was a logical and sequential step. The amazing thing was that it surprised her. She didn't want to think she was this person. She knelt by the dresser and started to rifle through it. But how would the identification of wild celery help her? She slammed the drawer closed, grabbed her tam, a coat and the crosstown bus, to surround herself, lose herself in the sounds of Handel.

In recent months, escorted by Wolfgang, or listening to him, she enjoyed the luxury of the dress circle. But all her student years had been spent climbing to the cheapest gallery seats. This last tier was populated by fellow students and bohemians from the Village whom she ceased to be conscious of when the great opening chord sounded. The melodic line gentled, she allowed herself to be soothed by the constancy of the flow. But the string section sliced her mood, the trumpets entered with their declaration . . . tidings of great joy.

She was alert for the soprano voice. "Come unto Him all ye that labor, and He shall give you rest unto your souls." . . . She heard . . . "He was despised and rejected." Mother was despised and rejected. "There are no tears on my face." Mother had a raised brown lump at the side of her face by her ear. She wore her hair over it. Benka sometimes pushed back Mama's hair and patted the mole. She was sorry for this blight, this ugliness. Because Mama liked pretty things. She remembered perfume bottles on a mirrored surface. They made a click when Mama set them down. She used to watch where the scent was put, delicate stopper between the breasts, behind the ears, under the arms and under the nose. That was in New York, when Mother wore the satin evening dress, and rouged her nipples and went without a bra.

The "Hallelujah Chorus" engulfed her. The ascension began . . . "Then in my flesh shall I see God." She remembered the first time in the bathtub Mama handed her the washcloth to wash her private parts. That made them different, important. . . . Flesh; "Then in my flesh" . . . she almost believed she had climbed into her mother's lap that night. . . . "For now is Christ risen, for now is Christ risen," and into the "Amen," the basso leading the full chorus. It has been fulfilled. The great happenings have happened. The people reaffirm their faith—I will see Mark. I will see Mother. The audience was lifted to its feet. They were graciously waved to join their voices to a reprise of the "Hallelujah Chorus."

She forgot she was part of the audience; the doubts, the fears, the uncertainties she didn't allow herself to think, poured from her. After the first triumphal cries, the mood was profound reverence. "The Kingdom of this world" building to . . . "And He shall reign forever and ever."

"King of Kings . . ." Benedickta sang out. "Lord of Lords."

"Forever . . . and ever," boomed from the stage.

"King of Kings!"

"Forever and ever."

"Lord of Lords. . . ."

Heads turned as the rich sound issued from her throat and rose above the gallery seats to surge against the notes from the stage. Like a wave and a backward running comber, they met.

For rows people turned to applaud. Benedickta found herself tapped on the shoulder. "That was magnificent. Better than the concert. Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

She was looking into warm expressive eyes, glowing with enthusiasm. It was a young man her own age. He paid tribute honestly. She gave him a quick grin. "Why not?"

They moved through their respective rows to meet in the center aisle. "Hi," he said.

"Hi." That was all there was time for before they funneled into the foyer.

"I'm Jeff Hartley. It's awfully nice of you."

"Crazy of me, you mean."

"No. We'll grab a sandwich right here. Because you don't know me, I won't even ask you to go up the block or across the street."

"You don't seem the kidnapper type."

"You never know. I'm a stranger and I'm sure your mother told you never to speak to strangers."

"If she did, I don't remember. I'm Benedickta Roland."

"Are you famous? Are you hiding in the gallery from fans?" As she started to laugh, he continued, "I'm not really having you on. I mean, that voice I heard just now, incredible!"

"Well, thanks, I'll tell my teacher I have a following of *one*."

"Are you studying at the conservatory?"

"I was. I'm studying privately now."

They entered the café and Benedickta ordered a cup of coffee.

"You can have a sandwich too. I got paid today."

"Let's split one. What do you like?"

"You decide."

"A cold roast beef with lots of mustard."

When the waitress stood at their table he said, "A melted cheese sandwich please."

"What happened to my roast beef?"

"Well, it's sort of against my principles."

"A roast beef with mustard is against your principles?"

"It takes seven pounds of grain to produce one pound of meat."

They took stock of each other, she suspending judgment.

"You see, I'm an assistant professor at Columbia University, my area is agronomy."

"And you're a vegetarian?"

"A militant one. I spend most of my time looking for sources of protein."

"Protein? You mean *protein*?"

"That's right. The foodstuff we need to feed the world."

"I see." She nodded as though they had just been introduced. "My brother was interested in protein. Well, actually in survival—emergency situations, in woods, forests, wild places. He told me slugs, you know, are a good source."

"He's right. And that's a great approach to take with my students."

She was amazed at the way the reference to Mark slipped out. She never spoke of him. She couldn't. No one knew him, only Harry—and he knew the dying Mark. Her Mark, the real Mark, had joined them naturally for a moment in this slightly garish restaurant. It made her stare somewhat intently at the young professor.

". . . The way I got interested, I had a teacher who quoted Orwell. 'Changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or even religion.' He spoke of buying time with food fortification. He wanted fortification introduced into soft drinks and had tried to launch a program to add Vitamin A to tea in India. They give tea to infants there as soon as they're weaned. Did you know" —he leaned across the table to make his point—"there are different classifications for malnutrition just as there are for burns. Third degree, that's sixty percent of normal body weight. That affects forty million preschoolers under the age of five in developing countries. Second degree, eighty million kids are in this group, with seventy percent of body weight. The mildest, of course, is first degree, where the child is at ninety percent of normal weight; a hundred and sixty million children fall into this category. That doesn't sound too bad. But even that amount of malnutrition makes killers out of ordinary childhood diseases. Five hundred times as many preschoolers die of diarrhea, for instance, in the emerging nations as in the U. S."

Benedickta followed this only by a complete shift of mental gears.

There are other worlds, she told herself with a certain amount of wonder, and he is caught up in one of them. How interesting, how odd. She forgot Wolf and the fact that she was getting married to him, she even stopped thinking about the performance and the E sung a quarter tone flat. She spread her half of the cheese sandwich with mustard. "I never realized all this. Tell me, when you say . . . fortify food, what does that mean exactly?"

He answered her question conscientiously. She thought that was probably a trait of his, that he approached everything in the same thoughtful manner. "Well, you see, technology is the great extender. Food can be fortified with low-cost protein, either natural or synthetic. For instance, spun protein made from soybean is an excellent meat substitute and half the cost of beef. All oil residues should be considered food. Fish protein concentrates are great. The problem is to keep the food from smelling like a wet dog."

Benedickta laughed. "And now I want to know what this has to do with music. I mean, why were you at the concert tonight?"

"Well, I tell you, assistant professors lapse into being human beings occasionally."

"No, I want to know. Do you read music? Can you follow the score?"

"I confess to being a complete illiterate. I *like* music. Isn't that enough to entitle me to a ticket?"

She probed further. "Like it *how*? What does it give you?"

"It relaxes me for one thing. My mind's no longer on oil seed, or what amount of amino acids the new wheat yields are ingesting. I forget all that."

"You drift, you float." She had an ecstatic expression on her face and mustard on her chin. "You can come to terms with things again, like yourself."

"Hold still." He leaned across the table and wiped off the mustard. "That's better." But he continued looking at her critically as though the mustard were still there. "Tell me why you say things like that? What is hard about being you, except maybe pronouncing your name."

"Benedickta? It's a beautiful name. It's helped me be myself. Who else could be a Benedickta but me?"

"Then it *is* hard?"

"Yes. Sometimes I hate it. Do you know how I work just to pro-

duce a diminuendo? Of course you don't, you don't even know what a diminuendo is. It has nothing to do with feeding hungry people. It is probably the most useless occupation there is, and yet when you have the sound just right, it delights you, it's worth the hours, the days . . . it's a thing that *is*, of and by itself. I don't know if it's important by your standards." This was not said humbly. She was daring him to find fault with her life, her art.

But he was protesting before she finished. "No, no, you misunderstand. What's the good of feeding the body if there isn't food for the soul?"

"Bravo! Thank you for making a niche for me. Now everything should be comfortable. We are both indispensable."

He was listening carefully, but not to her words. "Why do I get the impression that you are not happy?"

"Not happy?" She laughed at him. "I'm very happy. I'm getting married."

"Come on." He leaned back against the padded booth and looked at her sharply. "You made that up."

"It's true. Did you ever hear of Wolfgang Menetz?"

"The conductor?"

She nodded, concentrating once more on her sandwich.

"Then what were you doing in gallery seats by yourself if you're engaged to a world-famous celebrity?" He brought this out in the manner of a trial lawyer who has just scored a point.

"I'm not engaged to him. We didn't get engaged. I'm *marrying* him a week from Sunday. You'll see. You'll read about it in the paper. Everything Wolf does gets into the paper."

Jeff Hartley had a set look to his face. He was being unnecessarily stubborn about believing her. "Then why didn't he ask you to the concert?"

Having demolished the sandwich, she wiped her fingers daintily. "Because I told him I had a headache. Isn't that what women always say?"

"So you could be alone?"

"That's right. I think everyone should be alone before they get married. It may be their last chance."

"Well," he said formally and politely but with every evidence of disapproval, "I wish you happiness."

"Thank you." She finished her coffee. "Do you have to pay for a second cup?"

"No." He flagged a waitress.

"Actually, you know, I'm scared to death."

"I expect everyone is . . . just before."

"I don't know why he wants to marry me."

"I suppose he's in love with you. That's the usual reason."

"Wolf would have some other reason."

"Like what?"

"That's the trouble, I don't know."

"He loves you," Jeff decided.

"I don't think so."

"Why shouldn't he love you? You've got this glorious voice, you're both musicians, and . . ."

"And?"

"You're attractive."

"Am I? Where?"

"Well, just in general."

Benedickta contemplated his answer. "A generalized attractiveness. That doesn't sound very appealing. 'She possessed a generalized attractiveness.' "

"Or," he embellished, "she was in general what you would call attractive."

"Burrr!" Benedickta gulped her coffee.

He was no longer part of that game but wrapped in distance. "Are you really getting married a week from Sunday?"

"Yep."

Jeff Hartley hunted around in his pockets and came up with a card. He wrote on it and slid it across the table.

"What's this?"

"My phone number. In case you feel like talking."

"Before a week from Sunday?"

"That's right."

"Why should I want to talk to you?"

"I don't know. Probably you won't."

"You think I'm making a mistake. You think he's too much older. You don't say it, but you're convinced I'm using his infatuation as a way up. Well, for your information, Wolfgang Menetz is the most charming, interesting man I have ever met. He is a giant. Have you heard him conduct? Of course you have, so you know. He is a sensitive artist, a genius. I am tremendously in awe of him, and I am going to work very hard at being Mrs. Menetz." After having enun-

ciated "Mrs. Menetz" she stopped. There was nothing to add after that.

"Yes, well, I'm sure you know what you're doing."

Benedickta's eyes flashed. "I don't know who you are and you talk this way to me!"

He smiled slightly, because he hadn't really said anything.

Benedickta was embarrassed. She stood up. "It's been a crazy night. A night that has nothing to do with my life, that's outside everything."

"That describes it for me too. Except I'll never forget meeting you. I think it was great, that you came here with me and we talked. I didn't mean to be personal."

Before he could say anything else she was gone.

It was to be a church wedding. She did not tell Wolf what St. Anne's meant to her, so it was not St. Anne's she would be married from. She realized suddenly that she had never confided in Wolf but withheld all glimpses into her interior life. She wanted contradictory and impossible things; but mostly to have Harry reassure her. Of course he would not reassure her, he would stop her. And it was no use going to Emma; she could be depended upon to confide in Harry. Benedickta felt isolated. She told herself she was committed. She treated her marriage as an accomplished fact, and thought of it as an event, the way an outsider would perhaps read of it . . . "Brilliant conductor wed." He was brilliant and she loved him. He and the music he created were one thing to her.

But side by side with the brain that rationalizes is a more primitive brain. What it thought had no conscious line, but woke her in the night and kept her sleepless. She called it jitters, and her solution was to undertake another language session with Madame Cecily. It didn't help, her night anxieties paced more boldly. Her stomach didn't digest properly and her temples throbbed in time to an unseen baton.

Benedickta gulped two aspirins and searched through her purse. Not finding what she wanted, she dumped its contents on the bed. There it was. She smoothed the tightly wadded scrap of paper with careful fingers. She had no idea what she wanted to say to him, not even when she heard his voice.

"Hello?" It was a pleasant baritone. There was warmth even in the inquiry.

"Hello. This is Benedickta. You shared a melted cheese sandwich with me."

"I haven't forgotten you, Benedickta. I don't think I'll ever forget you."

She twisted the cord of the phone, she didn't know why she had called.

"Benedickta, are you there?"

"Yes."

"Did you get married?"

"No. That is, I'm going to. As a matter of fact I called to tell you that you totally and completely misjudged everything. I am the most happy person in the world."

"You're sure that's what you want to tell me?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, I don't believe you."

"Well, it's true. I'm being married Sunday."

"I believe that, all right. What I don't believe is the rest of it, about your being the happiest person in the world."

"I am. I told you I am."

"Then why get mad?"

"I'm not mad."

"Benedickta, listen, you don't have to go through with it."

"Jeff, I'm going to hang up. I shouldn't have called." She put the two halves of the phone together.

She couldn't overcome the feeling that it was another conservatory production. The stained-glass windows were effective; even Emma, sitting in the first pew, dabbing at her eyes, seemed part of the scene.

There were amusing touches. The ushers stationed at the door, asking, "Friend of the bride? Friend of the groom?" the tradition being to seat them on opposite sides of the church. But on her side was only Emma. When it was realized this was the bride's sole contribution and that Wolfgang Menetz's friends were overflowing their section, they allowed the wedding guests to sit where they wished. It was a packed house, every seat taken and people standing in the rear. The strains of the organ commenced. Not Harry's organ. Benedickta walked down the aisle with Harry.

It was all done with solemnity and decorum. She thought of this many times, trying to decide whether to laugh or cry.

The wedding band was slipped on her finger, and when Wolf lifted the veil and kissed her, it was part of the staging. The minister raised his hand and blessed them. For an instant she clung to Harry before walking out on Wolf's arm.

Flashbulbs went off in their faces, crowds of well-wishers pressed around. The reception was at the Waldorf. Piper-Heidsieck, caviar, blinis, Austrian pastries. The laughter, the congratulations, the pop of corks began to blur. Emma pushed her way determinedly to her side. "Be happy," she said.

Madame Cecily, who appeared more a Dresden piece than flesh and blood, seemingly endangered by the sway and movement of the crowded room, had other advice. "Play your cards right, my dear, and the world is yours." Madame Cecily had discarded four husbands and Benedickta wondered if she had played her cards right.

Bernard, looking like a balloon blown precariously full, maneuvered to her side. "When you are ready to work, *call, wire, telephone*!"

"Do you mean that?"

"There is only one Benedickta," he said, bending, but not far, over her hand. His delicate hand gripped her larger one. Both his hands and feet were small-boned and gave the impression of having been attached to the wrong body. His attention wandered. He was checking the chairs preparatory to ensconcing himself.

Once or twice she cast a sideways glance at Wolf. He was enjoying the party and seemed in no hurry to slip away.

It was much later that they were alone in his studio. She was a bit unsure how they had gotten there. "More champagne?" he asked.

She shook her head, wishing for the noise, the gala atmosphere of the party. Wolf, guessing her thoughts, smiled. "Relax, my love. Sex is great."

"I'm sure it is."

"I suppose Emma went shopping and bought you those atrocious white things brides are supposed to don for their ravishment?"

Benedickta was startled. How did he know a thing like that?

"Well, you can forget it. In the bedroom you are my harlot, my slut."

She stared at him. Was this Wolfgang? Wolf, who was always kissing her hand?

"Take off your clothes," he ordered.

She started for the bathroom, trying to merge the courtly Wolfgang with this facsimile.

"No, no. Here where I can see you."

"Are you going to take off your clothes?"

"It wouldn't be proper. But you are my child, my little girl."

"I thought I was your wife." Nevertheless she decided that he knew better than she how to go about this business, so she unhooked, unfastened and let things fall at her feet.

Wolf, fully clothed, sat in a chair. The fact of his being dressed disconcerted her. He knew this, of course. Slowly he got up and circled her. "Everything about you is too large. But your largeness has a lustiness, one might even say a lustfulness, about it. Your thighs are too heavy, a man could be crushed, or smothered in your breasts."

"If I'm such a cow, why do you want me?" She lay across the bed and watched his reaction.

Because of your appetite. You have a tremendous appetite for food, for music, and for what is about to happen."

"Sex, you mean?"

He smiled. "I know what your life has been. How old are you?"

"You know I'm twenty-four."

"And how many men have you had? . . . I thought so. I was right, you are a child, a greedy child. But remember, I am *not* a boy. I am a man who has developed special tastes."

Her eyes were half closed, but she was watching. Wolf opened the closet. Stacked on a shelf were sheaves of material, various stuffs, rhinestones, furs, velvets.

"Will you be a tigress?" He threw a striped fur at her.

She caught it and draped it around herself. "What do you want me to do? Attack you?"

"You just might, mightn't you?" He came to the bed but only to toss the bolster at a new angle.

Through her teeth she said, "Goddamn you, Wolf."

"I know. Deferment is delicious, isn't it?"

"I want you." It was an angry demand.

"My dear child, you have no idea what you want. But let's find out, shall we?" He approached her, this time with a small hand-held machine which he flicked on. "Until now you've been a castrata. You know about castrati? The young boys who disappeared from their villages during the Middle Ages, always the most beautiful, the

most gifted and so young. They were drugged, you see. Usually on opium, and placed in a tub of very warm water. Lulled into a dream state, caressed and massaged. At the height of arousal, in fact at orgasm, the sharp blade was pressed against the genitals, and the boy told the cutting would exalt him beyond mortals, but he himself must call . . . 'Knife! Knife!' Then the angle of the blade changed, the four ducts and the testes were severed. Art was served at the price of manhood.

"The castrati had a range no singer today could manage, their singing was disembodied. It is my theory that music makes castrati of us all. We sacrifice everything to it. I have. You have . . . until now. This is no knife. It is a machine for pleasure." Wolf made a lightning movement. She felt the shock of cold metal and thrashed in frenzy.

He switched it off.

She waited, tuned to the sound of the motor.

"You'd like more?" He started the machine again. Her genitals became red and swollen. Her brain became red and swollen. He switched the vibrator too high. She screamed in pain and climax. The eventual penetration she tolerated, despising his need when hers was satisfied.

During the first months of marriage she did not realize there was anything unusual about her nuptial experience or their subsequent lovemaking. She didn't know she was disappointed, because she was unable to define her expectations.

The sumptuous apartment she continued to think of as Wolf's. She could find no place in it that belonged to her. They entertained a great deal, but her only obligation was to attend. The guest list read like a Carnegie Hall program. They were seldom the same people, as in Wolf's circle there was much movement, Europe being the next subway stop.

During the mornings and afternoons she was still Benedickta Roland, who worked with Madame Cecily and Bernard. Evenings she was Mrs. Wolfgang Menetz, to whom everyone was polite. She was polite to her also. That seemed the best relationship. Acceptance saved questioning. She knew there must be no questions. Her sexuality had been tampered with, it quickened and tormented her. So she did what she always did—worked harder, and sang out her heart in even the simplest exercises.

She quickly discovered that Wolf took a great deal of medicine, dosing himself with anything purporting to have aphrodisiac properties. Vitamin E was routine, but there were more exotic substances, including a vile-smelling nostrum labeled with Chinese characters. It was a long time until she fully understood that Wolf needed these aids. Even so, their encounters were weeks apart. She wanted and dreaded them with equal passion.

Wolf was engaged for an opera series in Rome. "We'll open the Arcegno house," he announced.

"You have a house in Italy?" Benedickta asked.

"Switzerland, just over the border, above Lago Maggiore. You'll adore the Ticino."

Wolf was of the firm conviction that nothing could go right unless he checked it out himself. Hoisting Benedickta's suitcase the morning of their departure, he guessed correctly she had only gotten it closed by sitting on it. He undid the clasps and saw that the strain was caused by a large book. He picked it up. *Surviving the Wilderness.* He shook his head at his wife's taste in literature.

Half an hour later Benedickta found the book on the chair where he had tossed it. She whirled, screaming at him, "I have a right to some privacy. I won't have you going through my things. Some things are private, damn you."

"Will you be so good as to stop screeching. Think what you are doing to your voice."

"The hell with my voice!"

"Benedickta, I cannot understand what this is all about unless you calm down enough to tell me."

His reasonable tone infuriated her further. "I'm telling you to leave my things alone! Is that simple enough for you!"

"The book," he said with sudden comprehension. "Is it the book? You don't pack books in suitcases, my dear. If you want, it can be shipped later by freight."

"It cannot be shipped by freight. It goes with me."

"A funny kind of book for you to carry on about—*Surviving In Jungles,* or some such trash."

Benedickta leaped across the intervening space, striking him repeatedly. He was forced to pin her arms to subdue her. Her breathing ended in half sobs. She was hyperventilating and beginning to pass out.

Wolf brought a snifter of brandy and forced some down. "Are you going to explain your bizarre behavior?" he reiterated.

"I just want my things left alone."

The household, which now included Bernard and Madame Cecily, removed without further incident to Switzerland. They arrived in Locarno by train on a brisk October afternoon and were deposited in the center of the main street. Traffic flowed around them and their luggage until Wolf was able to corral an ancient taxi. The driver, when he heard he was to take them not into Ascona but to the mountain village of Arcegno, adopted a surly manner and, consulting his watch, declared it was impossible to leave until the quarter hour. He declined to give a reason for his arbitrariness, but persisted in it. Wolf was running out of patience, and Madame Cecily, seeing no other conveyance, suggested a glass of wine and cheese at the corner *ristorante.* Before they had finished their meal, the driver approached, insisting they "Come now, *per piacere.*"

This time it was Madame Cecily who exploded. "What is wrong with the fellow?"

They piled into the cab, those bags which couldn't be crammed in the trunk were stowed under their feet, and they pulled out directly after the large blue *della poste* bus.

Wolf smiled. "It is clear to me now."

"What?" Benedickta asked.

Wolf chuckled to himself but did not enlighten them. The lumbering bus, which appeared to be headed for the lakefront city of Ascona, after negotiating several turns began instead to climb a narrow, single-width cobbled road leading at a steep angle into the mountains.

"What happens if we meet a car?" Benedickta not unreasonably inquired.

Wolf indicated turnoffs at varying intervals where presumably it was possible to pull to the side. "Since the bus delivers the mail it has the right of way. As you can see, our driver is allowing it to run interference. He was consulting the bus schedule when he refused

to take us immediately and then persuaded us to leave half our lunch."

The driver doggedly tailgated up the mountain, with oncoming cars forced into the scooped-out passing sites.

"My goodness," Benedickta said, "this must be a very old road."

"Not really. It was built by prisoners of war in the forties. Before that, it was a dirt pathway."

"How did you find it?"

"On a walking tour. There are some beautiful alpine walks in the area. Pizzo Leone . . . that peak to our left. Ronco, a little cliffside village with spectacular views of the lake. And not too far, Monte Brè, where you take the *funivia* into snow. It's a marvelous location. We can swim in the mornings and ski afternoons. I'll show you some high meadows where a few mauve cows wander . . . ideal for learning music scores."

The house to which Wolf directed the driver stood outside the village. Benedickta had been hoping for a Swiss music box, but it was more like a New Jersey bungalow tucked into a corner of a sunny orchard. There was a surprising glimpse of Lago Maggiore, looking like a large blue button in her mother's button box.

The housekeeper who came outside to greet them was a handsome woman in her late thirties, with hair drawn tightly back over a well-scrubbed, no-nonsense face, broad and pleasant. A girl of eight or nine peered at them from behind her mother's skirts. It seemed to Benedickta there was something disturbing about the child, although she couldn't think what it might be. The woman's hands were folded on her apron, the planes of her face made separate by her smile. She resembled the sturdy Italian peasant woman Benedickta had seen as the train traveled from Domodossola past rice paddies and occasional villages. One sight that stayed with her was an old grandmother in the traditional black garb and kerchief, followed by a granddaughter in Levis. This woman was taller and her complexion fairer, but her dress was a modified version of the old grandmother's, not as long but every bit as shapeless. The woman herself had the self-assured confidence of a good servant. "Anna Maria Bianda," Wolf said. "She will look after us. And that minx who doesn't want us to see her is Nicole."

"*Benvenuto.* Welcome. We welcome you, signora." With one arm she reached to pull forward the reluctant girl. "Say welcome to Signor e Signora Menetz."

The girl's eyes flashed at them but she didn't speak. Again something tugged at the back of Benedickta's mind. Something uncomfortable. Did the child remind her of Benka, lost in years and distance?

From the first day sounds carried like motes of sunlight from the house in the orchard. The beekeeper paused as he set out his sugar water, a woman stopped above her mulched vegetables, interrupting her progress through the rows, a churn came up and did not plunge immediately down.

The ancient stone village which clung to the mountain seemed out of a Baba Yaga story. Wolf was busy, so she put off exploring. Finally she said to Nicole, "What about you? Will you show me the village?"

The child hung back.

"Come along," she coaxed, and put the child's hand in hers.

But Anna Maria called shrilly, "Nicole, come back here. I am sorry, Signora, there are chores."

"Are there?" Yes, they load you down with chores, an iron that is too heavy, piles of dirty dishes and unwashed clothes. "Let them wait. Nicole is going to show me the village."

Nicole began to cry. She had thought for a moment that the girl was Benka, but she was not. So she started off by herself.

Many of the older houses were built around a cobbled courtyard, entered by an enormous door through which a mounted rider could easily pass. The first floor housed animals, mostly cows and goats, the family living above. Armies of conquest had passed this way. They could not leave their imprint in stone, but here and there was a blue-eyed child. Technically Switzerland, the canton was Italian. Bocci was played Sundays in the square. And a simple church, with a single spire, lent tranquillity to the countryside.

Wolf was more relaxed here than in New York. He took time later in the week to show her paths that led into meadows and close to the lavender cows who munched unconcernedly. They picnicked by a tumbling stream from a hamper packed by Anna Maria. In a farther, steeper climb snow patches formed and the *alpini rosa*, the white rose of the Alps, thrust through its white cover, perfect and small. Benedickta refused to pick them.

"Are we far from Cortina?" she asked as they walked back.

"Not far." Wolf had worked on the score all morning and it had gone well.

"How far?"

"A nonstop six hours."

"Could we go there, Wolf? We'd get up really early and be back the same day."

"I don't know, it's mountain driving all the way."

"It must be beautiful."

"It is. You climb the Gotthard Pass, then drop down the Rhine valley into Liechtenstein. And the Tyrolean Alps . . ." He broke off. "All right, I promise to take you."

"The very first day you can spare."

He laughed lazily, watching her. "What's special about Cortina?"

"Hot mulled wine."

"You must grow up, my love, become more sophisticated. Hot mulled wine is only served after the first heavy snow, when the skiing starts. Wait a few weeks."

"What do I care if the season has started? I want to go now."

And they did, the following Monday. The drive began for her when they entered the St. Gotthard tunnel, a tunnel that led back into time. They climbed until the Rhine was a mountain stream.

Wolf, who was a superb driver, kept the car at top speed while not permitting his commentary to flag. He pointed out the onion-domed churches, the chalets, and mentioned that he had yet to see a St. Bernard dog in Switzerland. He did not notice her quiet.

Over the Brenner Pass, Italy—and the Dolomites craggy above them. Wolf knew which hotel was the place to be seen and from its veranda she gazed into pine forests toward marked ski trails. A light snow sprinkled the ground but the lifts were not yet in operation; there was as much green as white in the landscape. The air was crisp, it must be good to breathe, healthy.

The waiter was reluctant to serve the wine, but Wolf pressed a crumpled bill into his hand. When the drink arrived, Benedickta stared at it and her eyes filled with tears.

"What on earth's the matter with you?"

". . . I didn't know it would be this dark."

"That's something to cry about? People are looking."

She receded from Wolf, placing her fingers around the stem of the glass and bringing it under her nose. Spiced, pungent. She inhaled again.

"Benedickta!"

"What?"

"You were miles away."

"Further than that."

"Do you want to tell me?"

She didn't. Or rather, she couldn't. She could not speak Mark's name. The dandelions lay together. But it was Benedickta who tasted the hot and spicy wine.

On the drive back to the Ticino, Wolf said, "We're giving a party."

"Before you start rehearsals?"

"There's a mime troupe in town. I've invited them to perform."

She nodded and immediately forgot. Toward the end of the week Madame Cecily said, "Do you know that Wolf has invited a traveling dance group to perform?"

"Yes, he mentioned it."

"So you approve *la vie bohème*?" It was unbecoming for Madame to laugh; unexpected wrinkles appeared everywhere, grooving her face.

That evening Wolf himself rearranged the furniture to provide a cleared space. "Who have you asked?" Benedickta wanted to know.

"No one, no one at all. We aren't having guests, simply entertainment."

Benedickta found a loose robe laid out on her bed. "Isn't this a bit informal?"

"It is a private evening, my dear." Wolf selected a smoking jacket for himself.

"I feel half naked," Benedickta complained.

He smiled. "Then you are overdressed."

That was the first intimation of the evening ahead. Seated on the divan with Wolf, while Madame and Bernard lounged in easy chairs, she was completely unprepared for three nude dancers who leaped into the living room. Two males and a female, they assumed pose after erotic pose, holding each position until the beat of a hand-held drum impelled the next tableau. . . . Every variant of human sexual devising was mimed.

One of the boys, wildly beautiful, with great dark eyes, had the sculptured body of a Dionysos. But it was the girl who climaxed the show. Arrested midair, she was held by separated thighs to ensure maximum exposure.

The drummer, setting aside his instrument, picked up a makeup

box and began to draw dexterously on her flesh until the zone became a face framed by short, curly black hair. The fingers of the boys pulled, pushed, smoothed and lifted, making the area assume different expressions. The act didn't end, it expanded to include the audience.

A free-for-all ensued, the boys and girls servicing their patrons in any combination desired. Benedickta fled to the bedroom. She fled the scene not from outrage, but because she was afraid she would throw herself on that beautiful boy—demand he do to her the things he mimed with his partners. She fell across the bed, wanting as she had not wanted since she was Benka. The want was rampaging, frantic. She was terrified of it. She heard Wolf at the door. Having extricated himself from the acrobatic boy, he was ready for her. He lowered himself onto her, thrusting aside her hands that sought relief deep in her flesh, and pierced her himself. But he climaxed at once and she thought of Turtle, whose parts sprawled out. Turtle had been dead. And lying under Wolf was the death of her desiring. The exquisite wanting was tamed. She was not satisfied, but she was not distraught either. She still ached uselessly and the ache whipped anger. "You came to me after that boy! Wolf, you can't behave like this with me." She wouldn't listen to his apologies, but spent the rest of the night in a rear attic room whose ceiling sloped to the walls.

Lying rigidly on her back, she decided it was no longer possible for her to feel married to Wolf. Still, she had a vivid memory of Harry standing beside her in church . . . she was glad it had not been St. Anne's. Poor Harry had given her away to this frenzied madness. She tried to erase the sight of Bernard's blimp of a body gyrating excessively under manipulation . . . not to remember Madame's wizened hamstrings. But no matter how she felt about Wolf, she must think first of her music. One crazy orgy must not be allowed to disturb their household.

Next morning satyr and nymph were all business. Lessons proceeded on schedule. One's private life was not allowed to get in the way. Wolf received a phone call, and came into the music room. "They've moved rehearsals up a week. I shall have to leave for Rome."

"At once? Today?"

"I'm afraid so. I'll be at the Hotel Quirinale. You can reach me there."

She felt relief at having him go. But she made an effort. "When will I join you?"

"Soon, I hope. I want to whip things into shape a bit first."

"Of course. I understand."

As an expression of her new freedom she decided to take the road to Ronco, the neighboring village. The walk began at a wall of piled stones through which nasturtiums burst. The countryside grew wilder and she thought she heard the sound of falling water. After several twists of road she came upon an old mill. At first glance it appeared abandoned, but as she approached she noticed curtains at the windows. Apparently its upper structure had been converted into a house.

A table was set outside at which a woman and her teen-age daughter worked. Benedickta left the path and saw they were painting porcelain dishes. *"Buon giorno."*

*"Buon giorno,* Signora Menetz."

"You know who I am?"

"Everyone knows. Carlotta and I and everyone else listen to you. Your voice is a miracle. It is from God."

Benedickta laughed. "It is from working hours every day."

The woman shook her head. "Other singers do that. We have a Gramophone. We love music. But your music is different, it stirs memories. It is made of memories."

Benedickta felt enchanted by the place, the encounter, and she replied as she had to no other person. "Yes, memories are the best part of my life. Music requires the best that you have." She was amazed to hear herself speaking this way and to cover her embarrassment walked over to the workbench on which plates and platters were stacked. A large pile, still pristine, waited. Others had been decorated and were drying. Still others were in the process of receiving final garlands. For both women the subjects were taken from around them, a fern in a water glass, a nosegay of daisies. Sometimes it was the rim of the plate that was delicately sprinkled with sprigs of wild tracery. Or the center was used for blossoms and berries.

"They're beautiful," Benedickta exclaimed. "Are they for sale?"

"Of course. If the signora would take a fancy to one."

"Oh, but I must have more than one. Emma will go mad about them. Emma is a friend in America. Perhaps a set for her birthday. Help me choose. Which do you think?"

Carlotta got up and came around the table to assist in the selection. She used a stick to walk. Benedickta increased her order. "And Madame Cecily, my coach, she must have some for her apartment. Madame's apartment is a museum! The plates will feel at home there. And I want a complete service for my own house. Can you manage all that?"

The woman answered in her own way. "I am Signora Lauer. Come into my home and I will brew you a pot of herb tea."

Benedickta followed up stairs in disrepair into a hexagonal room under which water flowed. The creak of the giant wheel vibrated through the floor boards.

"I feel as though I'm inside a fairy book."

A week later there was a second phone call from Rome. "Signor Wolfgang Menetz, *per piacere*."

"Signor Menetz is not here. May I take a message? I am Signora Menetz."

"Ah, *sì*, yes, of course. I call to remind the maestro that rehearsals are to begin a week from Monday."

". . . Thank you, I'll tell Signor Menetz."

She returned to her interrupted lesson and was told by Bernard somewhat crossly, "Please sing in the middle of the note."

"Bernard, what is Wolf doing in Rome?"

"But surely you know?"

"I don't. I don't know."

Bernard seemed to swell with irritation. "No! I refuse, it is too much. Why should I place myself in this position? Domestic squabbles are always sordid."

"I see." She walked to the window and, looking past the orchard, stared at the distant lake. She found she was not surprised. "It's the boy from the troupe, isn't it?" Bernard muttered to himself in Italian, which she was beginning to understand. "Try not to feel so sorry for yourself, Bernard." She used Madame's formula, which he had heard a hundred times. "If you do, no one will sympathize with you."

They both laughed. "You are not desolate?"

"No, of course not. I knew about Wolf before I married him."

"Then you will not play out the stupid domestic scene?"

"No, I will not. Let us get back to work." And she so centered her note that Bernard looked up with adoration.

The plates arrived by donkey cart; each had been meticulously wrapped in straw. Also, she found a present, a German folk calendar. There were thirty-one tiny closed windows. You opened the shutters and behind each a miniature picture appeared. The gift represented hours away from work. People who have nothing, she thought, give the most.

Even though Wolf was in Rome, Benedickta continued to sleep in the attic room on the narrow brass cot. She did not wish to be reminded of what had taken place on the large double bed with its goose-feather comforter. She did not know what she would feel when she saw Wolf again. But his way of life, which Madame and Bernard and his friends accepted . . . she would not accept. No more vibrator or lewd performers.

Perhaps it had been her fault. Perhaps her lack of experience led him to these excesses. She no longer thought in terms of *love*, that was an emotion reserved for childhood.

How resolve the complexity of her feelings for Wolf? For she discovered that no matter what else he had been up to, he had been maneuvering on her behalf with the Rome Opera. He telephoned the news. She set down her evening cup of cocoa, which Anna Maria had brought. As she listened there was a surge through her body, a sort of capillary expansion. She picked out from Wolf's sentences "Cherubino," and tried to take it in as he explained further, "Emilia was in a car accident. She's in hospital. I've secured the part for you. But you must be at the hotel for tomorrow's rehearsal, one-thirty sharp. Bring Madame and Bernard. Take the score to bed with you. Commit everything to memory."

"But, Wolf, it's a mezzo role."

"You can't do it?"

"I can! I can! Oh, Wolf!"

"Yes, well, it's happened for you. Is it raining there?"

"Pouring. Rain is lucky for me. You're lucky for me. Thank you, Wolf."

"Remember, I want you familiar with the entire score."

"Yes, Wolf."

"How's the voice?"

"Good."

"Do twenty minutes of scales tonight. Again in the morning."

"Yes, Wolf." She wasn't coordinated, she said it after she hung up. She went across the hall and knocked on Bernard's door. "That

was Wolf. We're going to Rome in the morning."

"Roma?"

"Yes, Roma! Help me find the score for *Le Nozze di Figaro.* I'm singing Cherubino."

Bernard threw up his hands to heaven. "It's wrong, it's wrong for you. Menetz is out of his mind."

Madame, of course, had been listening on the extension. "What does it matter? An opportunity to be in the same company must be seized. You yourself have given her a beautiful middle register."

"But the tessitura!"

"One must be practical. Menetz will watch over her, guide her. It's what he wants. And we, my friend, must see that it happens."

The score was located for Benedickta, and at that point the household exploded around her. But carefully, so as not to break her concentration. A frantic but silent bustling was initiated, her bed turned back, the lamp adjusted, fresh chocolate brought. She started to hum "Voi, che sapete," an aria she had learned for Harry as a youngster. The traditional mezzo role would give no trouble. Her voice reached in its surprising range from G to E in alt. If a singer was young with a reasonably slender figure, Cherubino, the most famous of pants roles, was a good part to showcase in.

She slipped into bed, pounded the pillows behind her and opened the Mozart. For the next several hours she read completely through the Italian text. Frivolous, absurd, artificial—but with that touch of pathos that is the secret of great comedy, as Madame pointed out, in Molière and Shakespeare. Now she was ready to plunge under the waterfall of the music itself. She remembered T. S. Eliot: "music heard so deeply/That it is not heard at all, but you/are the music/While the music lasts."

That happened now as she worked in retarded time. Seeing the architectural sweep, she increased the tempo, her mind alive with music. *Aprite, presto aprite!* Recitatives, *legato* phrasing, ending *allargando.* The light in the small attic room burned until consumed by morning.

When in broad daylight she fell asleep, the entire household prepared for the move around her. Her clothes, selected by Madame, were packed by Anna Maria, down to toothbrush and comb. Her handbag was located, the score removed gently from her fingers, inserted into it. The car had been sent for petrol and stood before the house ready for loading.

There would be no time for breakfast, sleep was more important. Anna Maria was instructed in the preparation of a suitable brunch, light yet filling. Madame had given much thought to foods. One did not eat in the same way when one sang Mozart as when one performed Wagner. Mozart was ineffably light, poignant—a chilled sliced melon, toast with a scant dash of marmalade, a Thermos of orange tea. These items were placed in a hamper and stowed in the car in a readily accessible spot.

The start could no longer be delayed. Benedickta was wakened by Madame, a mackintosh placed over her nightgown, her feet fitted into galoshes and a rain hat stuck atop her head.

"What?" she asked sleepily. Then it was with her, and light like tapers shone in her eyes. "The music?"

"In the car. Go to the bathroom, and we are on our way."

The drive was oneiric, dreamlike. She was about to make her debut, not with some obscure company in the sticks, but in Rome. Rome, the Eternal City.

Madame whiled away the time with stories of her early experiences with singers. "Can you imagine, after five years of teaching Cressoni—all I accomplished was to get his pants leg to hang straight."

Bernard nodded solemnly. "There are things one cannot teach. If it is in a person, it can be brought out. If it is not in that person, go talk to a brick wall."

Benedickta smiled politely, she was not listening. She was singing "Voi, che sapete" in her head, and she was worrying. Was she ready? There were years of study behind her, but her actual experience was very limited—workshop productions, auditions, the church, a benefit here and there. Was Wolf bringing her along too fast? And was it a mistake to sing a mezzo role? If she failed here before critics of opera, and each Italian who bought a ticket had been weaned on opera, if she drew a poor review, a bad notice, it all closed like an oyster over a pearl. Music for her would dead-end.

She was conscious of Madame's fingers at the base of her skull, massaging. "Relax, my love. It will go beautifully. Your voice is a glory. Tell her, Bernardo, is it not a glory?"

"But of course." His plump round eyes appeared surprised. Madame had overcome his resistance to Cherubino.

This vote of confidence made it worse. They added themselves to the list of people she could not let down. The core of the list was

not Wolf, not even Harry or herself. Her commitment was to the dead. Alexandra Roland's expectations and Mark's blood laid the cornerstone from which must rise a charming, silly, infatuated boy —Cherubino—who could pour out his heart like a wounded bird.

Fortunately no time was allotted for brooding in the tight schedule Wolf had drawn. He met them in the lobby of the Quirinale, she was hurried upstairs to a suite of rooms, given broth like a convalescent, and put to bed. She slept the clock around.

Wolf selected her dress and the accessories with which she was to meet the *régisseur*—the director—fellow members of the cast and orchestra, including the *répétiteur*. Benedickta had a final bite of chilled melon and a sip of strengthening red wine. She was temporarily distracted from her state of nervous anticipation as Wolf led her through an underground passageway connecting the hotel directly to the theater. "Is this really happening, Wolf?"

His laugh was assured and assuring. Wolf, she told herself, knew what he was doing. She made the entrance taught her by Madame, and saw with surprise that she was welcomed with deference, accorded a respect she had not encountered before. *Remember who you are. . . . Remember your brother's blood.* She felt herself in command. It was a new role for her, Benedickta Roland, performer!

Wolf arranged for her to run through both arias. External music reinforced the internal that had been playing in her head and without thought it issued from her. She was already into *"che cosa è amor"* before she knew she was singing. They wanted more and she began "Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio." Her voice was alive, she could feel her larynx relax. A perfect G.

*"Molto bella!"* cried the Count. "This American is quite extraordinary." She glanced into Wolf's face, he was smiling. The rehearsal continued. When she was not on, she was singing in her head, reinforcing the memorization done in her attic room. It was proper and fun to start with Cherubino; before long she would sing the Countess. This was now ably sung by an Italian diva, but the sound was not what Benedickta imagined, the phrasing, the tempi she felt differently. And as always when she felt strongly, another interpretation was torment to her. She earmarked that role: someday, in this theater, for herself.

Enacted about her was not only the play, but scenes even more extravagant. The Countess disengaged herself from a dulcet moment.

Stepping out of her role, she marched downstage center and yelled in Italian at Wolf that her pianissimo "which, as you know, has made my reputation, is being drowned out by those brutes in the orchestra, who think playing loud is playing good!"

Wolf sidled through the row of theater seats to the side steps. He ran up them, muttering in German, "God, why did you make singers so stupid?" He confronted the diva, slapping the score in lieu of the lady, and exclaimed in supercilious Italian, "If the illustrious star of the Rome Opera will be so good as to look over the score. Here"—he rustled the pages viciously—"at this exact spot, the great Wolfgang Amadeus himself marked the passage."

It all fascinated Benedickta, especially as you never knew in what language a curse or pet name would be directed at you. She found herself beginning to think in Italian. But all her life she counted time in English.

Toward the end of the first week of rehearsal, Benedickta woke and noticed at once that she had difficulty swallowing. She got out of bed and went into Wolf's room to describe her symptoms. He became rigid with apprehension. "Is it a sore throat?"

She swallowed several times to make sure. "It's more a full feeling. And it's a bit scratchy."

"Open your mouth, Benedickta. Put your head back further, way back. I can't see, come to the window. Say aaahh. Can't you get your tongue out of the way?"

"What does it look like?"

"Perhaps the slightest redness and a white patch on the palate."

"A white patch?"

He placed his hand on her forehead. "Cool," he reported, and took her pulse. "You are not sick—yet. But we cannot let this develop."

"I never have colds," Benedickta said distractedly, "never!"

"It was that drive down in the rain. My God, if I don't attend to every detail myself, something like this happens."

"Please don't be angry at Madame or Bernard. They really did take good care of me."

"As attested by the fact that you can't swallow."

"The theater is drafty, you know."

"Is there anyone else in the company who can't swallow, answer me that?"

"What can we do?" Benedickta moaned. "Isn't there something?"

"Of course, of course," Wolf shouted at her. "Don't upset yourself. It is not a sore throat, right? Just a slight pinkness at the sides."

"And a white patch," she reminded him.

"Madame will deal with it."

"What about rehearsals?"

"You will not attend. You will go back to bed." He followed into her room.

Benedickta's low speaking voice had dropped by a half octave. "Will they replace me?" It was calm out of the abyss.

"No. We will get you over this."

"What will you say to everyone?"

"That you are indisposed." He reached Madame on the phone. The entire company stayed at the hotel. She was on the floor below. "Cecily, get up here. We have a throat problem." He described her condition in a rapid German that Benedickta was unable to follow. She laid herself out on the bed as though it were her bier.

Wolf slammed the phone into its cradle. "Madame will attend to this. I have seen her perform miracles. Do exactly as she says and you will sing Cherubino."

Benedickta had been counting on her fingers. "Eight days. And I must have more rehearsals. The cast will need a complete run-through. That means less than a week."

Wolf towered above the bed. "I said you will sing. I signed a contract saying you will sing, and by God you will sing."

"It's over," Benedickta muttered, "I've muffed it."

Wolf reached down and slapped her across the face. "I do not break contracts."

The effect of the blow was to lift her from the morass of self-pity to anger so intense that both cheeks blazed red. "Don't ever do that again, Wolf. Go slap your pretty boys around, they may like it. But don't try that with me again."

Wolf had accomplished his purpose and somewhat more. "So, you know about Claudio."

"I know."

"You didn't say anything."

"Because I don't care, damn it."

"That's an interesting statement coming from a young wife. We'll go into it later when you're well."

"Anytime you please."

Madame knocked and entered with a carryall over her arm and clutching a large basin. "Have you been drinking sufficient fluids?" she asked Benedickta without preliminaries.

"I just woke up."

"We will see to the liquids, but first . . ." She went into the bathroom and wet numerous cloths under the faucet which she spread over the radiators, "to create a moist atmosphere," she explained.

Wolf followed these actions with a baleful glance. "It was the trip down in the rain. You were in charge, Cecily. You should have seen to it that she kept warm."

"Stop fussing, Wolf. A small cold, a nothing. I will have it cleared up in no time if you get out and leave me to it."

"I counted on you, Cecily."

"Out!"

He had more to say, but after a short struggle with himself, left.

A waiter knocked, delivering a hot plate. On this Madame began to boil water. "Now, open your mouth, child. Let me look." She peered intently into the cavity. "This is nothing. If you did not have a performance in a week, I would think nothing of it. As it is, we will proceed with the treatment."

The treatment consisted of pouring the boiling water into the basin, at the bottom of which a large sponge soaked it up. Madame, reaching in with tongs, transferred the sponge to a shallow saucer, and squeezed it under Benedickta's nose. "Now, get your face into the steam. Closer, don't be afraid, it won't burn you. That's it. Breathe alternately, first through the nose—then through the mouth. Bigger breaths, deeper. And again. The great Caruso vaporized every morning before a performance."

When Benedickta had been at this twenty minutes, Madame said, "Now you must sing the C scale into the sponge."

"My God," she moaned, "it sounds like a goat coughing."

"Never mind. Next time it will be better. Continue to suck in the steam. It will act to cleanse the lungs and bronchial tubes and soothe the mucous membranes."

After ten minutes she washed Benedickta's face in cold water. "Rest now, we repeat the treatment in an hour."

During that time tea and a nauseous Turkish concoction the consistency of glue were poured down her. "*Salèpi*," Madame insisted over her protests, "is excellent for the lungs and liver. You

see, we have kept you from mucus-forming foods."

"Yes," she said faintly.

Toward the end of the day Madame reinstituted melon, also pineapple juice and a quarter of an apple. A further inspection of her throat and Madame pronounced her better. Then added, "How do you feel?"

"The same."

"But that is better. At the inception if it does not get worse, it is better. I have my own theory as to how this occurred."

"How?"

"After rehearsals, after using your voice all day, you continue to speak in an ordinary tone to everyone, to Wolf, to me, Bernard, the waiter. Working the voice as you do, it is better to whisper. Marcella Sembrich, after a hard season, retired to her villa in Switzerland and whispered for a month. Lotte Lehmann herself believed in whispering, as did the great Melba."

"They whispered?"

"Not only whispered, they muffled the throat against drafts."

"I'll do anything to sing," Benedickta whispered as Madame wound her throat in flannel.

The next day passed as the first. By the third morning, when the swelling, pinkness and white patch were still there, Benedickta grew desperate. "Have they replaced me, Madame Cecily? You can be honest. You can tell me."

"They have not replaced you," Madame said firmly. "Of course it is the policy of the company to call in an understudy."

Benedickta cursed in several languages, but softly, in a whisper.

"Never mind, my pet," Madame soothed. "You will sing Cherubino, I promise it. There is a way, not a cure, but to shellac the throat with a preparation of ether and iodoform. It lasts for three hours and enables one to get through a performance. But it is only to be used in extremis. There is danger, I can't deny it. You must pant very quickly as it is applied, or it will anesthetize you."

The prospect of so drastic a remedy did nothing to raise Benedickta's spirits. To restore her morale, Madame announced they would have a rehearsal.

"How can we do that?"

"You will not sing your part. You will speak it under your breath. And with your fingers, block out your stage positions."

This exercise reassured Benedickta; at least she had not lost her grip on the role.

The fourth day she woke recovered, symptom free. She threw her arms about Madame. "You have saved me. I'm well!"

"Swallow," Madame commanded.

Benedickta swallowed conscientiously.

"Any sensation whatever?"

"None."

"Now then," Madame said, "you will do acting of a different kind today. You will feign illness and stay in bed. In this way—an additional day of rest. However, you will be up for short periods and you will vocalize a half hour now and a half hour before retiring."

"Can we go over Cherubino?"

"Today again you must mark."

That evening Madame announced to Wolf that Benedickta would be at tomorrow's rehearsal.

Much to the relief of the company, she appeared, but sang mezza voce. Walking through her part, singing under her breath, she was conscious of the understudy perched at the back of the hall like a bird of prey ready to pounce. Benedickta seized Madame's hand. "I can sing it!"

But Madame did not yield. "Tomorrow."

The following day she was allowed one aria to reassure the director. Not until dress rehearsal did she sing the entire Cherubino. By then the tones were golden and full, the crisis over.

The effect of her indisposition so shortened rehearsal time that it seemed she had just joined the cast when the opening was upon her. Two weeks before, she had peered behind the shutters of her German calendar, brought from the Ticino, to see what picture was there as a symbol—success or failure for her debut. The scene told her little—daffodils, centered on a wooden table. All night, in and out of dreaming, she knew she would wake to the daffodil day. The bones of other times fitted themselves together. She played old games with an unseen partner, double solitaire, at which she cheated, Russian bank, gin, all the time humming, not Cherubino's *duettino* but "White Coral Bells." When the sun struck her face, she sat up as if a cord jerked her erect.

This day was the beginning of her life. The trick was to survive

it. It must be different from other days. She had her shower, toweled her body vigorously, used the inhalator and began a vocal warm-up. Most singers refrain from singing in the morning. The vocal cords tend to wake up stiff. They said, however, that Marjorie Lawrence, on the morning of a performance, jumped out of bed and tried for a top C. Benedickta worked to it gradually and finally rang for breakfast. The breakfast, like a prescription drug, never varied.

No rehearsal was called, so she slipped out of the hotel and walked the streets of Rome. An ancient city exists as much in the mind as in its bricks and mortar. She had asked Wolf why Milan rather than Rome should be the operatic capital. And Wolf explained it was because of the ambivalence of the Church to opera, which leaned too much on the theatrical to be fully accepted. This was the city of the Vatican, of St. Peter's Basilica, dominated by Michelangelo's noble dome with Bernini's colonnade, opening, according to the guidebook, like winged half-circles to embrace mankind. She read about these wonders in her hotel room. But what she passed were craftsmen opening their shops, glassblowers, workers in leather. To either side of the piazzas, flowers and potted plants, a jumble of bookstalls, art galleries and sidewalk cafés, with the rush and sound of people. The city filtered to her mostly as a sound, Romani peddlers hawking fish, the laughter and shrill squabbles of children, the magnified darning-needle noise of motor scooters. But gradually these distractions receded. As a singer she was constantly in another flow of time, caught in words not her own, feeling desires that did not originate in her. Cherubino, young, clamoring, eager to throw himself into emotional embroilments. Through him Benedickta felt love.

In Rome there is a clock on every block, sometimes five to a block. She returned to the hotel. Madame was waiting for her, telling her to rest. There was a basket of flowers from Wolf sitting on the table in the center of the room. They were not daffodils and the table was not made of wooden planks. Wolf himself was not to be disturbed. She had witnessed other opening nights when he wrapped himself in concentration like a penitent in sackcloth. He had developed a routine for getting through the day. She was too new at it to have many devices. "I think I'll do my nails," she told Madame. She sat by the window and rammed at her cuticle.

Looking at Wolf's flowers, she thought of the door she kept

locked between their rooms. He did not comment on it. His attitude toward her remained as courtly as ever. She knew if she wanted to discuss the boy, he would supply whatever details she wished. But Wolf lived for her only in the pit. It was there that electricity flew between them. She understood the great conductor had fallen in love with that part of her which was not flesh.

She preferred to make up in her room. The very thought of the theater sent a chill through her. It was time to transform herself into the young imp. She sat before the dressing table. Madame tied back her heavy dark hair and daubed her skin with an astringent before applying a base. She herself took a pencil and darkened her brows and drew the line that elongates the eyes. She blended various shades to highlight her nose and cheekbones. Her mouth she outlined strongly. She smiled at the result. A young boy filled her mirror. Her costume was hanging in the theater dressing room and Madame threw a robe around her for the trip through the passage.

The cast was in various stages of dress, makeup and preparedness. All sorts of rituals were enacted. The Countess showed up with a cross blessed by Il Papa; one of the minor performers parted the curtain a fraction and, looking out at the audience, made an obscene gesture to prove his defiance of their opinion. Wolf appeared suddenly in her dressing room. "That boy meant nothing to me, nothing." It was so sincerely said that she almost believed him. "I've brought champagne. It's a tradition, a glass clears the sinuses. A tenor I knew used to carry two small bottles of Perrier in every costume. Everything is used from snuff to carbonated soft drinks. But champagne is the ticket." The cork flew across the room and two glasses were obtained from the prop man.

Benedickta kissed Wolf's cheek. "Thank you, Wolf, and good luck."

The urbane, sophisticated maestro turned white and spat over his shoulder.

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"Oh, I always come through somehow or other. It's your debut, the evening belongs to you, Benedickta. Break a leg. And remember, watch me for the diminuendo. We'll just slide into it."

She nodded as she drained her glass. Pressing her hand quickly, Wolf left. It was time to shut out sights, sounds and people, to commune with herself and to test her instrument. She hung her

head forward, swung her arms and rotated her neck slowly to relax the tensions. Then she tried her low anchor note. Quickly she flew up the scale. Limber. She didn't want a full warm-up. She had heard too many stories of singers leaving their voices in the dressing room.

Now, to find that still center, like a nun at vespers. Her circle of thought narrowed, her concentration was unbroken. Her being became music, yet she was alert for the call. "*Tutti!*"

The opening measure, vivacious, charming, lyric, drew her from her dressing room to the wings. There was Wolf, in the pit, arms raised, baton pointing. The thrill of Mozart took hold; she stepped onto the boards, the lights wrapping her, separating her from the blackness into which she sent her voice. She moved as Cherubino, thought as he did. These ladies he loved, they were the girls Mark never had a chance to love.

She began her first aria. A sexual thrill throbbed in the flow of notes, the need she had repressed flowed in a new way, descending with the mellowness of poured honey. As music flowed from her, response flared. This audience who had been exposed to a hundred Cherubinos laughed at her antics but were torn by her voice. She coaxed emotion from the black void. The voice probed, vibrated and teased lightly, escaping to evoke tempests. There was no Benedickta, there was a magical creature.

The audience allowed her to weave harmonics as she pleased, allowed her to play upon and change their moods . . . *con mormorando* . . . with gentleness. Unqualifiedly, delightedly, Bravas! rang out. At intermission everyone was speaking of the triumph of the young American.

Act II: she and Wolf, phrasing together. His dynamism muted, now pliant, as he brought her from ineffable sweetness to laughing pranksterism. How she loved him. How could she have thought she did not love him? They skimmed over the notes, coming to rest, taking flight again—legato.

When the curtain rang down, it was not over. The applause demanded her, drew her back. In the dressing room she was besieged. Someone asked, "Are you the daughter of Alexandra Roland, the pianist?"

"Yes."

A program was shoved at her for signature. In an utterly dazed state, she misspelled her own name. Congratulations came in all

languages, much of it she couldn't followed. The manager of a small house, Teatro la Fenice, pressed his card into her hand and smiled at her. "Me, you have not fooled. You played well, you sang well, but you are wasting a superb soprano quality. I may have something for you."

"Thank you. Thank you," she said to him, to them all.

Wolf led her back to the hotel. That night the door between their rooms was not locked.

*Le Nozze di Figaro* closed. *La Traviata* played and *La Gioconda.* Benedickta watched rehearsals and, before the production of *Madama Butterfly,* knew that she was pregnant. She didn't tell Wolf.

She wondered with some trepidation how a child would fit into her husband's life. Suppose he didn't want a baby? He was well into his forties, and marriage to her was the only tie he had forged. As a marriage, she was beginning to understand how strange it was. She wanted it to be too late for any intervention when he found out.

Besides, it was delectable to savor the mystery of her body, and not share it yet with anyone. Another creation, the prospect was full of awe and wonder. The pregnancy came at a good time. She had made the kind of success that ensured her eventual return. She mentally reviewed the divas who had families. Madame Schumann-Heink led the list with seven children and a stepson. Her family would be more modest—two, she thought. The first boy would be named Mark. She gave herself to the tranquil, almost lazy mood that held her. How gifted the child would be—a Roland and a Menetz. The world seemed made afresh each day. And every evening the same magic happened as she watched the stage. She learned the roles, knowing they would someday be hers.

But she wanted now to return to Arcegno, wait for the winter to pass and spring come to the orchard. Her husband was amazed at her decision. "You don't want to stay in Rome?"

"I hate hotel living. I miss the house, the village, the view of the lago, so distant and peaceful. You'll come after the performance

Sundays and fly back Tuesdays. That won't be too bad, will it?"

"If that's the way you want it. I'll send Madame Cecily and Bernard with you."

She looked at him, her eyes very dark. "You're quite rich, aren't you, Wolf?"

He smiled at her, amused.

"Tell me, I want to know. You *are* rich, aren't you?"

"Fairly rich. Why?"

"I miss Uncle Harry. I just wondered . . ."

"Oh, no, not Uncle Harry."

"But why? I thought you liked him."

"I tolerate Uncle Harry, but adding him to the household is unthinkable. Definitely not Uncle Harry."

"I didn't mean add him to the household. His house is St. Anne's. I just meant a visit. He's never been to Europe, Wolf. Think what that means to a musician."

Wolf did not consider Harry Osborn a musician. "I'll think about it."

"If it's the fare, I could add my salary."

"I must teach you about money someday, Benedickta. The first thing to understand is that anyone can earn it, but very few people know how to spend it well. We must consider if sending for Harry would be spending it well."

"Wolf," she said with exasperation, "I'm pregnant."

He stared at her as though she spoke in some language he had not mastered. She meant to tell him so differently, in a quiet, homelike atmosphere, outside the theater, away from after-theater parties and the influence of his young friend. She believed Wolf when he said it was over. Still, she was sure the boy was in Rome.

"I'm sorry to blurt it out like this. But you see why I want to go home."

"I see we must talk." He took her hands and led her to the settee, seating himself opposite her. "Being pregnant and having a child are two different things."

"Not to me."

"Benedickta," the tone was patient, "you are an artist. Your body is an instrument, a Stradivarius, created and fashioned with great care. You cannot subject it to the ordinary brutalities of life as though you were a peasant."

"Madame Schumann-Heink . . ."

"The devil with Madame Schumann-Heink and her brats. I will locate a doctor immediately."

"Why? I'm not sick. I never felt better."

"If you won't think of yourself, then please consider my feelings. A marriage like ours has no place for a child."

"What do you mean? Like ours?"

"Hopping continents, filling engagements, and when we are 'in residence,' our time will be taken up with colleagues, enjoying the kind of life we have earned."

"Wolf, it's your child, another creation."

"If you consider spawning or whelping creation. Your life is centered in music. What is this delusion that you with your remarkable instrument are cut out for motherhood? And me, Wolfgang Menetz, surrounded by nappies, it's absurd."

"Bach didn't think it was absurd. He surrounded himself with children, with life, and that's what his work reflects—*life*, Wolf!"

"So that's why you wanted Uncle Harry, as a confidant. He'd tell you exactly what I am saying, too many years of his life went into the making of you as a singer. He'd reason with you just as I am."

"Send for him and we'll see."

"All right, if you agree to abide by his judgment."

"Of course I won't. I am having my child. I am very happy. And I will be very happy to see you in Arcegno whenever you want to join me."

It was as if he lifted his baton and forgot for a full measure to lower it. "Will you want Madame Cecily and Bernard with you?"

"Of course. Do you think I will give up working? I have energy for everything?"

"You're in your twenties. What about next decade? There's no such thing as an ex-child, you know. And I'm a decade further along than that."

"What about posterity? Aren't you interested in some part of you going on?"

"Of course. That's why I make recordings."

"Wolf, I'm sorry you feel the way you do. But I can't help believe it's the natural way, and that you could feel the same happiness if you would let yourself."

"Benedickta, will you please not presume to tell me how I should feel about my life?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that I *want* you so much to feel good about it."

"You're right about one thing. . . . Arcegno. Go, and for God's sake, try to think things through. Perhaps you *should* send for Harry."

"No. Feeling the way you do, if Harry agreed with me, you'd have the idea we were ganging up on you. Just promise me that Arcegno won't be a banishment. You will come see me?"

"You know how busy I am here."

"Please, Wolf."

His reply was nonverbal, a shrug, as though Benedickta had become too much to deal with on any reasonable basis. She accepted this unspoken judgment. He was not the first person to feel this way about her. Mark had expressed it most lovingly with his "Shut up, Benka." But the phrase had the same tinge of frustration her husband experienced now. And twenty-four years ago Alexandra Roland climbed into the playpen to seek refuge from her. Her greatest talent—rivaling even music—was for trouble. Simply by *being* she seemed to come into conflict with everyone else.

If Madame Cecily and Bernard were surprised at once more being transplanted, they refrained from comment. Anna Maria and Nicole had retired to one corner of the house, which upon their arrival was completely opened, cleaned and aired. Wolf flew in the following Sunday evening. On that occasion he presented her with a topaz necklace which looped twice around and fell to her waist. Each burnished, golden gem was set separately in antique filigree. "It must be pricelesss," she gasped.

"It brings out the tawny glints in your eyes."

"I always thought my eyes were dark."

"They are, except when you laugh, then they change subtly, lighten to a shade almost matching the topaz."

"It won't change anything, Wolf. Do you still want me to have it?"

"I gave it to you, didn't I?"

His tone was surly and prompted her to reply, "I'd rather have Uncle Harry than the topaz necklace."

"That's an ungrateful thing to say."

"It's truthful anyway."

"Truth in art is one thing, truth in life is usually an excuse to say something unpleasant. Besides, you yourself decided he wasn't to come."

"I know."

Wolf regarded her shrewdly. "I don't think you gave me the real

reason for returning to Arcegno. You haven't forgiven me Claudio."

"Why do you drag everything in? I don't even think about him."

It wasn't a quarrel, and later she kissed him for the necklace and spun it around to catch and shimmer with the lights of the room. In spite of the effort on both their parts, she felt estrangement. When he left, the tension disappeared and Benedickta slipped into the luxury of content. The schedule of practice was inflexible. But she felt she was on vacation. Very early Madame seemed aware of her condition. "We will continue with the exercises, especially long walks. That is good for you at present."

Benedickta all but smothered the little woman in an impulsive embrace. "You know!"

"Of course."

"And you think it will be all right, don't you? You think it will work out?"

"Everything works out," Madame Cecily replied philosophically.

"But do you think Wolf will . . ."

"Oh, Wolf. That is a different matter."

"I don't care. I really don't."

"He feels that, I think."

"I've never been unfaithful to him. I've never had a Claudio!"

"Faithfulness is not a matter of the body. It is a matter of the heart."

"Since when is it unfaithful to a husband to want his child?"

"Do you want *his* child or any child?"

"*This* child. I want *this* child. And from the way you all act, you'd think it was something unnatural and wrong. Just because you never had a child!"

"But I have."

"You have? What happened?"

"Nothing happened. He grew up."

"Then why aren't you happy for me?"

"A career and a family?" She shook her head.

"That's just the kind of cliché you are so against, Madame. I can manage. Really. There's no problem. I begin to see that people create most of the problems in this world. They simply make them up!" And off she went for her ramble, along the steeply curved street, taking a goat track that veered toward pastureland. Patches of snow still lay on the ground, their outlines darkened by melt-

ing. The sky was a postcard blue, and under sheltering leaves grew *fragole*, the tiny sweet wild strawberries of the Alps, so small they were only a taste and sent her hunting more.

She breathed deeply from the diaphragm, bathing the whole music mechanism in clean mountain air. Removing shoes and stockings to ford an icy stream, she paid little attention to the trail, finally resting with her back against a tree. It was necessary to be honest with herself. She had not loved since Mark died. She knew that. In the pit Wolf was a god, and she adored him. But in houses and hotels he was unpredictable, unstable, unappetizing and frequently unpleasant. She did not like Wolf very much in houses and hotels, and especially not in bedrooms. She used to think the love that had once been in her died with Mark, atrophied like an unused muscle. But it wasn't true, love had been there all the while, dormant. And this life, this quickening inside her awakened it, called it. She loved completely and with great joy and only waited to know who it was she held such tenderness for.

"Who are you?" she asked aloud, pressing her hands against the firmness of her belly, remembering the many times she had been born out of the chest at the back of the closet.

Madame, of course, had her theories on what was best to eat when one was enceinte. The mucous membrane theory was discarded. Benedickta was served custards and glasses of milk, warm from the mauve cows of the village. She thought of visiting Signora Lauer and her daughter. But she didn't feel the need of company. She was happy as she was, and thriving.

Madame and Bernard stopped talking when she came into the room and she knew Claudio was back with Wolf. She experienced a curious reaction. The night of Handel's *Messiah* flashed on her and she wished that young man she had shared a sandwich with was the father of her child. How crazy. She couldn't even remember his name . . . Jeff something. She decided the vagrant thought was unconscious revenge, her way of striking out against Wolfgang and his Claudio. What a time for him to be playing about. But she communed inside herself, her body sent out signals of well-being and she felt movement. That was important. The rest trivial. She placed Madame's hands on her stomach.

"It is rambunctious," Madame said, "the sign of a healthy baby."

* * *

There was nothing wrong with the baby, they determined afterward, but a malformation of the uterus made it impossible to carry this or any child to term. The pains came on suddenly and the baby was torn out, a five-month fetus. A boy. It never drew breath, never knew a moment's life. From the womb into the darker hiding place of earth. Unformed, unwanted—except by her.

The opera season was over. Wolf, truly distressed for her, came home and stayed. He was patient, gentle, and displayed traits that he had never shown before.

Benedickta met his overtures with distance. He could afford kindness, pity. He had won. She was empty. Her perfect health guaranteed a fast recovery. Her perfect health mocked her. The small defect hidden in her robust body ensured she would be what Wolf and the others wanted—an instrument.

Suppose she never opened her mouth again? Never sang another phrase? Went off somewhere and waited tables? No one would care except the guardians of her voice. What did talent mean? She thought of Alexandra Roland and how quickly she had been forgotten. Yet someone on opening night had mentioned her name. "Are you the daughter of Alexandra Roland?"

Was she? Would she rise up with the same fire? Could she again impart fire? She felt so little. She felt nothing. Except for Harry, she had no friend. The love that had been nudged awake shriveled. No one wanted it. What was wanted from her was song. Anna Maria filled her room each day with freshly picked wild flowers. But she remembered the fuzzy-stemmed *fragole* half hidden under leaves in meadows on another planet from another time. For no matter how good to her, and how thoughtful, they were thinking, It's for the best.

Benedickta felt hostile toward everyone. *Time.* Wolf was the first to use the word, then Madame. Even Bernard . . . *in time, given time, with time* . . . What was time? She thought it was the space around her and she was drowning in it. She lived two summers that year, the summer she had anticipated and the actual one. She had read the books expectant mothers read, and visualized the routine of caring for a child. In the middle of a conversation, she would think, I would be giving him a bath now, or perhaps putting him down for a nap. She kept track of the weeks, knew how old he would have been.

Then one day she no longer kept track. Perhaps hormonal levels had returned to normal. *Time*, she reflected, angry that they had been right.

Rome Opera invited her to join the company. The manager of La Fenice asked her to audition for the leading role of Elvira in *I Puritani*. Rome, of course, meant Wolf in the pit, and the audience filled with his friends, important people in the music world. How to weigh the experience of *I Puritani* against the advantages of a Rome production? She talked it over with Wolf. "The Rome company, no question."

But she prepared the Bellini aria with Bernard and Madame, Elvira's "Qui la voce."

Wolf said nothing. He had given his opinion.

Benedickta went to Venice for the audition, accompanied by Madame. She worried whether she had chosen her material well. Much of the cavatina lay in her middle register, but Bernard had given her a fine, delicate placement, especially on the words *voce* and *sospir*. It expressed the fragile quality of the Puritan maid. Also she liked the rhythmic freedom. It would show her to good advantage. But she must remember the *con audacia* should be part oboe, part clarinet.

Benedickta needed audience feedback. To stand on a bare stage, sing into a cavernous void, conscious of five men hunched together in the third row, was not the way to bring Elvira to life. She had an insufficient rehearsal with the pianist who attempted to lead and not to follow. Still her voice was lavish, the coloration dazzling, and in the wings Madame smiled.

The five men did not smile. They thanked her courteously and asked if she had ever carried a lead.

"At the conservatory . . ." she began.

They waved this away.

"I could carry it. I could sing Elvira."

"Thank you, Miss Roland. We will make our decision."

Travel money was discreetly handed to Madame and they returned.

"I did well," Benedickta said, "in spite of them."

Madame nodded. "You did well. But it is a large responsibility. You seem young to them. Besides, Wolf thinks it would be moving too fast."

"We'll see," Benedickta said.

Once she was home, the household took on an appearance of normality. Friends and acquaintances of Wolf dropped by. There were parties. They went frequently to the local trattoria for wine, dark, freshly baked bread and cheese with fruit. They bet on the bocci game. There were dinners in Locarno, drives to restaurants in Lugano. One in particular was spectacular, situated on a pier, the dining under large beach umbrellas in an arm of the lake. Once, during a midday meal, a squall came up. They continued eating under the umbrella, watching the fine drizzle etch the usually placid surface. Of the Italian lakes, it was the most beautiful. Garda was more austere, its sides rising steeply, Maggiore tricked out with concessions. But Lugano held discreetly nestled estates whose lush gardens formed the shoreline. For each excursion Anna Maria packed their passports. As the border undulated, Switzerland at any turn might become Italy.

Wolf prepared to go to Rome to negotiate a contract for the upcoming season. "Well?" he asked Benedickta, coming in to say good-bye.

"Yes, you're right. I should be singing in Rome."

"It is better not to jump too soon to major roles. I will arrange for parts that will not strain your voice. At this point what you sing is very important." He kissed a neutral area to the side of her face and left. Benedickta returned to the coloratura passage she wanted to manage with more precision.

Her practice was interrupted again, this time by Anna Maria. The incursion was out of character. Always unobtrusive, hers were the unseen hands that guided the functioning of the house so that everything proceeded smoothly and, it seemed, without effort. Seeing her standing there, Benedickta was overwhelmed by memories. She could appreciate the difficulties of keeping pace with the schedule of events from picnics to dinner parties and at the same time manage a regular change of linens, daily marketing, meals served with conflicting preferences in mind. She herself should have thought about rewarding Anna Maria's unflagging industry, suggested to Wolf that he increase her wages—for she supposed that was the purpose of this foray into the music room. She almost certainly deserved a raise, although Benedickta couldn't remember what she was paid. A frown of concentration held her features. But she could hardly remember

something she didn't know, and the truth was, she had never interested herself enough to ask Wolf. She wondered if she should make a commitment without Wolf's approval. "Yes, Anna Maria, you wanted something?"

The woman stood her ground, but she did not reply.

"You wanted to speak to me?" Benedickta asked again.

"I am with child, signora."

Benedickta regarded her for the first time as a woman. She was plain because she chose to make herself plain. Close to forty, she seemed as scoured as the pots and pans in her kitchen. But if she relaxed that rigid posture, the ample body could take on sensuous lines. Widowed, Wolf said. Knowing the strict moral code of the Ticino, Benedickta was aware she dealt with a crisis. She asked the sensible question first. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, signora."

"I don't suppose it is anyone who is free to marry?"

"The father is Signor Menetz, signora."

"Wolf?"

"Yes, signora." The woman's eyes did not leave her face.

For the first time she sensed the boldness that had always been in that glance. "Perhaps you should be having this conversation with Signor Menetz."

"I have spoken to him, signora. He refuses to do anything."

". . . What was it you asked him to do?"

"It would be a scandal," Anna Maria spoke unemotionally. "I could not work in the village once you left. Nicole would be ostracized, I could never hope to find her a husband."

"Nicole . . ." Benedickta said, recalling the elusive quality that bothered her. Sudden intuition told her what it was, she resembled Wolf. "Your daughter, Nicole, is also . . ."

"Yes, Signor Menetz is her father."

"All these years!" Benedickta lost control, she heard herself screaming. Then she fought an impulse to laugh, thinking of the many nostrums he took, thinking they apparently worked too well.

"He was my *patron*, signora. It was his wish."

Hostility flared between the women. The summer before, she had been a bride, Anna Maria welcoming her to the house, Nicole hiding in her skirts. This summer she was a lifetime older.

"I cannot bear another child who has no father. I must have

money for an abortion. You must help me."

"I don't see how I can act on my own," Benedickta said coldly. "Besides, I have only your word that it is my husband's child."

"Signor Menetz will not deny it."

Her anger toward the woman drained away. "It's terrible to lose a child, Anna Maria. Perhaps you don't know."

"I know that also," she said with dignity.

Benedickta was at a loss. How could she give advice to a woman so much older? "I don't know what to say."

"Help me." It was not an appeal, but a demand.

"I don't know, I must speak to my husband."

"Speak to him then. Afterward you will help me." Having said what she intended, Anna Maria returned to her tasks.

But work for Benedickta was ended for the day. Other things were ended, not for the day—ended forever. Wolf, sensitive to each nuance in music, had brought her into the home of his mistress and bastard daughter. Why? If he was not prepared to give the marriage a chance, why marry? What did she mean to him? Had he felt burned out and attempted to rekindle his talent with hers? Or was it an effort to regularize his life? But why make an isolated effort and not change anything else? She realized she was not thinking about Anna Maria. Her own existence needed sorting out. Why had Wolf done this to her? Why had he humiliated her? But she knew the answer. He had consulted his own convenience. He was arrogant enough to believe he controlled Anna Maria, and therefore nothing would come out. Damn him. No one could do this to her. No one could treat her like this.

Divorce? Her mother's divorce had been disastrous. Benedickta moved about the house in an aimless pattern, but she managed to avoid the other occupants. There was no one she could talk to. Madame Cecily and Bernard were Wolf's employees.

She attempted to extract the feelings buried in her, dredge them up and look at them. Wolf had been scrupulous about her musical training. He provided her with the best. That was the key to his regard for her. She was cherished as a fine and rare instrument. As a woman she was used, deceived and humiliated. For Wolf, people didn't count. She had considered him an extremely complicated human being, but there was only Wolf and Wolf's needs.

She valued the artistic closeness between them. She relied on his

musical judgment. Now she asked, Is Wolf necessary to me?

There was no apparent change in Anna Maria's attitude. She went about her duties. Things ran smoothly as before. It was Benedickta who felt uncomfortable, and she could hardly bear the child, Nicole. How irrational, she chided herself. When her husband returned from Rome she must be ready. And so she thought out what to do.

Bernard drove in to pick Wolf up later in the week. She waited at home. Wolf kissed her briefly. "How charming you look, Benedickta. Arcegno agrees with you. I must say, it's good to be back. But Rome has been successful, highly so."

"Wolf, come into the music room." Of all the rooms in the house, this was most hers. At least of these four walls she felt herself mistress.

"What's the mystery?" Wolf asked.

"No mystery since we both know."

"Know what?"

"About Anna Maria."

Wolf gave a surprised grunt. "What gall. She had no business involving you."

"Telling me, you mean."

"Perhaps that's what I mean. Look, Benedickta . . ."

"Wolf, I don't want to hear about it. I can't deal with what you did to me in any rational way. So I want to stick to Anna Maria. I simply want to know what you intend to do."

"Nothing."

"She insists on an abortion."

"Let her have one then."

"She says you object."

"I object to having it pinned on me. How do I know it isn't one of those bocci players?"

"It has to be more than a casual thing between you. Nicole is your child too."

"Anna Maria claims so."

"She is. Of course she is. And the thing that infuriates me—" She found herself crying and she had planned to remain icily calm. "I was sort of added to the ménage. How could you have done it, Wolf?"

"Which?"

"Brought me here!"

"I thought we were talking about Anna Maria."

"We are. I want you to give her the money for an abortion."

"Once and for all, I refuse to have any part in this. And if you take my advice, you won't let her manipulate you either."

"You have a responsibility toward her, Wolf."

"How do I know that?"

"Wolf, she's desperate. You've got to send her someplace then, until the baby is born. Please, if you won't do it for her, do it for me, because I ask you."

He smiled indulgently. "A child bride, just out of the conservatory, who knows nothing of life?"

"I've learned quite a bit about life this past year, Wolf." There was silence between them. "You refuse, even though I ask you to help her?"

"You are misguided in asking, Benedickta. And I certainly refuse."

"I see. And have you anything to say to me? Any explanation or apology, anything like that?"

"Benedickta, what's come over you? Did you expect Wolfgang Menetz to fit some middle-class mold? Did you expect me to utterly alter my life? I've done marvelous things for you. Trained you, opened doors for you, got you Cherubino, am in the process of negotiating a splendid contract for you."

"I'm aware of what you've done for me, Wolf. And what you've done *to* me. You added me on to everything else—Claudio, Anna Maria—and hoped I wouldn't find out."

"I see, it's Claudio that really bothers you? Why didn't you say so?"

"Not Claudio. Me! It's what you've done to me. But now we'll play by the same rules, Madame's rules . . . an artist's right to *take*—and not be grateful."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I should divorce you, but I'm not going to. I'm going to continue as Mrs. Menetz. The name makes people listen. I'm going to use your name, your influence and your money."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. I hardly recognize you, Benedickta. What happened to you?"

She smiled at him serenely. "*You* happened to me, Wolf."

* * *

Benedickta sold the topaz necklace. She did not look forward to another scene with Anna Maria and thought of simply putting the money under her door. But she felt she should try once more to dissuade her. Her own body had too recently experienced the trauma the woman faced. So before retiring, she climbed to the servant's wing. She knew the moment she looked at her that her mission was doomed. The impassive handsome face might have been a Mayan carving, geometric and stone.

"I did as you asked." Benedickta handed her an envelope.

"Thank you, signora."

"I still hope you'll use the money to go away. You could have the baby and start over again somewhere else."

"You don't understand, signora."

It was the peasant speaking, born and bred for a hundred generations to this valley and these fields.

Benedickta did not understand. Her bondage took her lightly and effortlessly over the world. Her bondage she carried within her. "Well, good-bye then. I am going to Rome in the morning. I will not be returning."

"Good-bye, signora."

There had been a transaction, but no communication. Benedickta returned to her room and the single brass bed. She sang the Elvira role through in her head because she could not help it. She had heard nothing further from Teatro la Fenice. It was to be Rome then.

She took a room at the Quirinale, and although he occupied a suite on the same floor, she barely saw Wolf. He was feuding with the management over the contract. Rehearsals would not start for another two weeks. She busied herself buying plants, which she crammed onto the windowsill. A poor substitute for the delicate *fragole* and sturdy-stemmed *alpini rosa* of the high meadows. Arcegno had been home. She left a grave there.

In her attempt to make the hotel room more homelike, she indulged in a final purchase. She bought a canary. Watching it warble and chirp entranced her. Opening the cage, she allowed it to fly around the room. The small bird alighted on her shoulder and, as Benedickta continued her warm-up, laid its small body against her throat. When Benedickta paused, the tiny bird reached up, took a fold of her cheek gently in its beak, and gently tugged.

"Look, Madame, she wants more." Benedickta was ecstatic. She

stroked the bird softly. *"Cara,"* she whispered, naming it.

Wolf appeared toward the end of the week with contracts. "I've had my difficulties with the *régisseur,* but I think you'll find I've made an excellent deal for you. Quite the best any young singer has commanded."

"Thank you." She was not really interested in the terms, but in the parts.

"They have decided to open with *Così Fan Tutte.* That means Fiordiligi."

She nodded. It was pure pleasure to sing Mozart, although it was an unusual choice since they had done *Le Nozze di Figaro* last season. And Fiordiligi, while within her range vocally and a challenging role, was not Elvira.

"By the way," Wolf said casually, "I haven't seen you wear your topaz. I hope you took care of it. I would hate to think that in all the moving it has been lost."

She looked at him. She had been waiting for this. "I sold it."

"I see."

"It was mine, wasn't it?"

"And you gave the money to Anna Maria."

"Somebody had to do something and . . ."

Wolf came over to her. "Anna Maria is dead."

"What?"

"Yes, some butcher, I suppose, in a neighboring village. Or a midwife."

"My God." She ran her hand along the rim of a high-backed chair as though making certain it was really there before she sat in it.

"I'll pour you a Cognac," Wolf said.

"No, I don't want anything. I have to think. It's not the first time in my life that I've killed someone." She looked up sharply. "What will happen to Nicole?"

"An orphanage, I suppose. I'll sell the house and appoint my bank as trustee. That way, when she's of age, the girl will have something to marry on."

"No."

"Well, if you have a better plan?"

"I do. I don't want the contract. I don't want to work with you. I can't do music with you anymore. I'm going to divorce you, Wolf. I should have done it in the first place. I'm going home to America, and take Nicole."

"Benedickta, I know you're upset."

"I *am* upset. Shouldn't you be a little upset yourself? Anna Maria's dead—and you sit here, not even caring. That's made me see. I'm leaving, Wolf. I'll send my notice to the company in the morning."

"You can't do things like this, Benedickta. They are expecting to sign you. You'll get a reputation for unreliability." Her face was closed to him. "All right, I agree you and I were a mistake. I thought you were as free, as soaring in your spirit as your voice. But that glorious instrument is caged in an utterly thoughtless and capricious person. Like that damned bird. As for taking Nicole, she's no flesh and blood of yours, you can't take her."

"I'm going to, Wolf. You can't leave a child alone when her mother dies."

"I have never acknowledged Nicole, and I don't intend to do so now."

"It won't cost you anything extra. I'll educate her on the money from the house. You *will* sell it. And I'll expect an accounting. Besides, there'll be gobs of alimony from my rich and famous ex-husband."

"Not a dime. It is *you* who are walking out on me."

"You drove me to it. You and your mistress and your boys and your vibrator. How would that look in the tabloids?"

"You're an impossible little bitch. How could I have been so mistaken in you? I shall never speak to you again except through my lawyers."

"Bravo! Bravo!" she called after him. "What an exit line!" It was good to fight, to quarrel, to pitch her emotions at someone else. When she was alone *she* was their target. There was the proud, severe face of Anna Maria. There was her own career . . . in leaving Wolf and the Rome company had she destroyed herself? Could she go home to Harry, Emma and America? She was unknown there. She had no manager and no idea how to go about getting one. Wolf handled her contracts. Now there was no one, and she had undertaken the responsibility of Nicole, a child she'd never liked, who seemed as remote and unknowable as the people of the village.

She taunted Wolf with the alimony she would pry from him, but that was for the pleasure of seeing him squirm. *He* had the high-priced lawyers, she had none.

The ramifications of what she had done were brought home to

her by Bernard. He bade her *addio.* He had taken a post in Milan. She counted on him and Madame to help her prepare a role. She had never worked without them. She felt panic. Of course there was no role to prepare, and this panicked her more.

Madame also came to see her, but after scolding her as a short-sighted wayward girl, said, "Remember I told you, you must *take,* my love. Bernard, even Wolf had their place. But you no longer need them."

"Madame, do you think so?"

"I am not mistaken about talent."

"Then you must stay with me, help me."

Madame sighed. "I am old, my child, with no one to look after me but myself. You must be able to afford me. I would require twenty percent of your salary, which would necessitate your staying here with the Rome company. Because, my dear, twenty percent of nothing is nothing."

"Then I am alone after all."

"We are all alone, my child. But I will exert myself on your behalf."

Benedickta nodded. This was more than anyone else had offered and she was grateful, understanding that life had taught Madame caution.

She was surprised when Madame spoke. She thought she had left. "I think you should wire Teatro la Fenice. There's an outside chance . . ."

"I heard they weren't going to produce *I Puritani.*"

"Because your husband spread it around everywhere that you were accepting a contract here. But if they know you are available, it might still be possible. . . ."

Benedickta picked up the telephone. She couldn't wait for a wire to be received and considered. She had to know. When she got through to him, the *régisseur* was cordial. If he was surprised at hearing directly from the artist, he concealed it. He had been impressed by her audition, by her grasp of the role. But he understood from Signor Menetz that she was unavailable, and they were considering dropping the opera.

Benedickta's knuckles whitened over the phone. "I've learned Elvira. I want to do it."

"Perhaps if you could come to Venice, we will explore the possibility of putting it on later in the season."

Benedickta's eyes were closed, but her voice came full and vibrant. "I will come immediately to sign a contract. You see, signore, I have a child and a canary to support."

Madame clasped her hands and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. Benedickta hung up and Madame's question issued forth a croak. "He said No?"

Benedickta's eyes lightened a full shade. "He said Yes."

Elvira was, to use Madame's phrase, a perilous role. "The work itself is associated with tragedy. Bellini died completing it. The entire company ringed his graveside and sang the tenor melody from Act Three."

Benedickta scarcely listened. She was turning pages, deep in the story. She read it as though for the first time, asking how each turn of events must have seemed to Elvira, a gentle Puritan maid in love with Arturo of the Royalist party. On their wedding day he used her bridal veil to disguise the imprisoned Queen and escape with her, leaving Elvira distraught. By the end, the maid regained both Arturo and her reason, and, on a deeper level, her faith. Impulsively Benedickta hugged the score to her.

Madame repeated, "A perilous role. It was first conquered by the incomparable Giulia Grisi. But of those that followed, one lost her voice and another fell desperately ill. She died, I believe, in sanitorium."

"I shall not fall ill," Benedickta said.

They were sitting in a Venice hotel, not as grand as the Quirinale. Benedickta needed cash to place Nicole in a private school. She arranged for an advance on her salary to pay the tuition and purchase the required uniform. Wolf had not tried to stop her taking the child. In fact, her only contact with Menetz was regarding the inheritance Nicole realized from the sale of the house, which was doled out in quarterly payments. The little girl accepted her mother's death impassively. She did not cry, and she did not allow Benedickta to comfort her.

Madame had taken over, at least temporarily, as vocal teacher

and coach. With a sideways look at Benedickta, she banished what she referred to as her brooding by removing her hardware, which consisted of extravagant bracelets and rings. Seating herself at the piano, she struck a chord. "We first hear Elvira offstage. It is a prayer she sings, so there can be no dynamic sound. Although hidden from the soldiers, you sing with them. Yet you must capture the audience's attention. How will you do it?"

Benedickta frowned at the notes.

"No, no," Madame said impatiently, "not the music . . . the *words* are your clue. Elvira calls on the moon, the sun and the stars, as the soldiers do. But her intent is different—the moon, the sun and the stars are to bear witness to her love. Well?"

"It must be sung, I think, with simplicity. That is the nature of the girl. And the audience must know her before they see her."

Madame was pleased. "Do it," and she began to play.

*"La Luna, il Sol, le . . ."*

"No, no . . . we cannot *see* you. Your attack must be absolutely clean. Again."

This time she was permitted to continue—*"dan gloria al Creator . . . onor, onor!"* The line floated and Madame had no more to say.

That evening they worked again. Madame once more removed her hardware and they went at it. "The polonaise is brilliant, it sparkles. But try for more accuracy in the fioriture. The initial 'Ah' must make me quiver."

Benedickta studied the score before replying. Harry had taught her early to be a purist. Phrasing exactly as the composer indicated produced magical results. She began again, shaping the falling diatonic line in the first part of the cabaletta and the downward chromatics as a single entity. Madame lifted her hands from the keyboard, put on her gold, fastened her platinum, then turned a face streaked by tears and mascara.

"What is it?" Benedickta asked.

It was Cara who answered in full-throated song.

Only three rehearsals were scheduled. This was inadequate and Madame demanded an appointment with the theater manager, but returned defeated. "What are they thinking of? You will hardly know your way around the stage. And in such a brutal role! It is unthinkable!"

Nevertheless that was the way it was. Madame and Benedickta

rehearsed in the hotel room. They dragged the furniture into an unused corner, and Madame placed small pieces of tape everywhere. Tape labeled CENTER STAGE was stuck on the floor. By the light switch, FIRST ENTRANCE. All props were labeled and positioned. This was the preparation for her first starring role.

Opening night Benedickta was in a trance. It was the only way to keep from falling to pieces. She brought *Surviving the Wilderness* to the theater and laid it on her dressing table. Madame looked at her with concern, rubbed her hands and feet to increase circulation, plugged in the inhalator and poured a glass of champagne. Madame was trying to think of everything Wolf would have thought of.

"Thanks." The monosyllable sounded hoarse.

"Try a scale softly," Madame urged.

The timbre of her voice, the fact that she *had* a voice, reassured her. Madame combed her hair from her face and bound it in a linen towel.

Benedickta leaned forward and studied herself with care. A more innocent look, wider eyes, shorter nose, rosy cheeks. Elvira began to emerge.

Places were called and she stood in the wings, touching wood before she sang the familiar "La Luna, il Sol, le Stelle." The music swept on, it carried and sustained her. A rush of excitement leaped between her and the audience.

The concealed anxiety of the music surfaced when she appeared in her bridal gown, and her cry was almost a scream. They were sitting in the cafeteria—she had let Mark go off by himself—then Harry told her—the sanitarium. She tore Arturo's gold chain from her neck. She jumped up, overturning the dishes.

*"Arturo! Tu ritorni?!"* At a moment both terrible and lyric, she imagines she sees him. *"Oh vieni al tempio! . . . Qual febbre vorace m'uccide!"* What a fever rages in me. Her voice rode above the chorus.

The night was a triumph. A crowd swelled in front of the theater, waiting for a glimpse of her. Madame, puffed to her full size, was a wasp who guarded her flank. The manager himself escorted her through the throng. The next performance there was not a ticket to be had for *I Puritani.*

Benedickta stood up to the physical strain. She needed success, it seemed to nourish her. She became, in some manner, beautiful. She resembled Mark more than Benka.

The city of Venice wanted to fete her, her dressing room was packed with flowers, invitations, cards, well-wishers. But the role itself demanded her full attention. To be in strong voice she must conserve her strength. She continued to live monastically, working with Madame and performing. She made what seemed to her an interior change in the second-act cabaletta. The brilliant "Vien, diletto, è in ciel la luna" was traditionally treated as an exhibition piece. Benedickta approached it more thoughtfully. The result was breathtaking.

Controversy flared. The Venetian press called her an original interpretive artist. It was a long way to come in a single season.

On her days off she and Madame Cecily strolled along the Grand Canal, fed the pigeons in the Piazza San Marco, exclaimed at the pink-and-white marble of the Palace of the Doges with its arcade and loggia. Once they stopped to watch a glassblower at work and Benedickta bought a tiny glass horse, which she sent Nicole.

"You cannot be in Venice," Madame said, "without riding once in a gondola. My treat." So they hired one of the long black fleet to be propelled along night water, breaking patterns of wavering light. Far out in the middle of the canal, an affluent tourist had engaged two gondolas, one for himself and companion, the other filled with musicians. The strains of "Santa Lucia" carried to them. Their boatman tried to catch the gondola of song and steal more bars of music. But Benedickta laughingly urged him into side canals. Here they glided by ordinary homes with clotheslines strung between buildings and across streets of water. These were blind corners, and their man got up speed as he approached, crying loudly, *"Avanti!"* as warning to any who might be on a collision course.

"It's like playing chicken," Benedickta whispered. But she enjoyed the experience, because as in her roles she entered another time, another world. She might have been a Medici or a Borgia. Fifteenth century and twentieth blended in the silent waters.

She was a local celebrity, Venice acclaimed her. Word of her success trickled out, yet no other house bid for her. Madame told her not to worry about recognition. It would come. In the meantime her next role should be Norma. Intrigued, Benedickta began to study it. Sometimes Cara and she sang to each other and that made her laugh. Madame lectured her about her nonexistent social life. "You are too much alone."

"I could have a backstairs affair with my leading man. But I can't stand the way he waits for his cue with his jaw resting on his chest."

"How can you joke about Burtelli? Burtelli indeed! With his fat wife and five children! Men of means, the cream of society, leave their cards, their gifts, and wait for a word."

"Let them wait," Benedickta said carelessly. She had taught Cara to take a crumb from between her teeth.

But life is not written in a single key. She opened the letter from Emma with no premonition. She put her hand to her mouth and ran to the bathroom, where she threw up. It didn't help, the years were still in her, the years under his roof, the daily lessons, the endless patience. He had planned for her, entered her in the conservatory, given her life.

Benedickta stayed in the bathroom because it was the place where she was. *A stroke. The doctors are hopeful. Hopeful,* it was the word they used when Mark was dying. Those days were suddenly with her. The visits, each brighter, more jolly than the others. The stacks of brochures, colored photographs of mountain lakes. The name came back, Lake Huntington, California, high in the Sierras. Which cabin had he decided on? She couldn't remember and this failure of memory seemed terrible to her, a betrayal.

Which number? she asked herself, wild-eyed. Which? But it was gone, dislodged by all the years. She sobbed, "Don't let him die." She meant Mark.

Madame rapped gently on the door.

"Harry is dying."

"I read the letter."

"I have to go to him, Madame."

"You have three more performances."

"I can't. He could be dead by then."

Madame said, "He was your teacher. I am your teacher. I would want you to finish your engagement. I would insist."

"Oh, God, I can't think. You'll have to think for me. He's the only one left, he and Emma. I wanted him to come to Arcegno, but Wolf wouldn't allow it."

"I know, I know."

"Three more performances! He could be gone by then."

"I will secure a plane reservation. You will leave after the last performance."

Madame phrased this with an emphasis that, even in her befuddled state, got through to Benedickta. She raised her head and stared at her. "You won't come?"

"I will stay and arrange your next season. I will arrange *Norma*. I am not part of that time, it is better you reenter it alone."

Benedickta listened, dependent as a child. "Yes," she said.

"Take a deep breath. Wash your face in cold water. It is time we left for the theater."

That night the melancholy of the role was distilled in a new way. A muted expectancy hovered over the audience, an uneasy foreboding. In the final act each note, each syllable added to the unbearable tension. A critic wrote: "Her incomparable descending scales are the loveliest music ever heard in Venice."

A sign NO VISITORS was tacked to the door of her dressing room. Madame helped her change to street clothes and guided her home. She lay in bed all night without sleeping, without dreaming, without moving.

In the morning Madame got her up and made her go through the ritual of the day. The last performances, scalpers were busy. It seemed all Venice was packed into Teatro la Fenice.

Each night as Elvira, Benedickta was allowed to go insane. The final night she felt half dead. She had not slept. In desperation Madame gave her pills, which produced a drugged state that kept her as if under clear water. She saw and was seen, but everything was distorted. By performance time she was exhausted. There was only one way she could get through the evening. Benedickta bearded the conductor. "Maestro, tonight we must use the cuts employed in concert, beginning, *'O redentemi la speme,'* you see?"—she tapped the score with a pencil—"to this bar."

"Impossible." He was horror-struck. "It has never been rehearsed like this." Benedickta was unyielding and he summoned Madame from the dressing room to reason with her.

Madame took his part without hesitation. "You must not attempt this, Benedickta. It means shortening the cabaletta. You would have to end with E flat in alt. Impossible. You could not give it full measure."

Benedickta ignored Madame and spoke directly to the conductor. "If your musicians can't do it, I'll sing it *a cappella*."

The conductor turned to Madame. "She is a terror, a terror, that one."

"Do what she says, Maestro," Madame begged. "She is under great strain."

"*She* is under a strain?"

Madame Cecily leaned close. "I tell you if it is not shortened tonight, she will not be able to finish."

Calling on his patron saint, between curses and prayer the man bent over the score, employing a heavy pencil.

That night there were minor flaws in the voice, Benedickta had difficulty with the rising sixths. And there was a covered tone in the middle range. The audience recognized the effort, and excitement mounted. It was as though they were spectators at a circus and Benedickta an aerialist negotiating the high wire without a net. A hush lay over the auditorium. She accomplished the aria and approached the cut that, if all went well, would land her at the E flat in alt. Benedickta claimed it fully, made it uniquely hers, sustaining and holding. The crowd yelled, *"Bis!"* Through a four-minute ovation the opera was not allowed to proceed. Bravas and applause rang in her head.

Afterward as she bundled her by water taxi out of Venice, Madame said, "Every male in the audience had an orgasm on that note."

Benedickta was too tired to smile. She hardly knew how she had gotten through the night. Madame journeyed with her to Milan. But she must survive Milan to New York alone. At the boarding gate Madame said, "The longer he clings to life the better chance he has."

Benedickta grabbed both her hands. She slept the fourteen hours she was airborne and went through customs, claiming the single bag Madame packed for her.

The cab passed the downtown area where she and Mark had lived with the Beldens. She remembered the Maui goats. "I did it, Mark," she whispered. But he said carelessly, "Shut up, Benka." And she knew what he meant. If everyone that loved her died, what was the good of being successful for strangers? And suppose one day she was not successful? Suppose she reached for a note, and her voice failed? . . . She rolled down the window and poured a sturdy top C into the traffic.

The startled cabbie craned around. "You all right, lady?"

Of course she was all right. Any singer who can produce a top C without warm-up, that caused heads to turn and cars to swerve, was all right. The note reassured her about Harry too. Harry had laid

the foundations for that note. If it was strong and well, then he must be better. He could not die when his top C reverberated over Manhattan. There was stamina in that sound, strength. She would sing it to him, she wouldn't bother with "Hello," she would sing her top C.

When the taxi drove up before the house that had been her home, the new life fell away, the old one became vivid. This was Mark's promised land, never entered. "Be well, Mark . . . and you will come to live here." Why was it tangible and real for her, yet distant for him as though it existed in another plane of time? Seeing the solid door with burnished brass fixtures, she knew that behind it everything was safe. She was home.

She rang the bell, remembering the pattern of chimes, thinking of Emma. Emma was the soul of the house. It shone in every corner, its windows reflected light, the kitchen smelled of baking. Emma wasn't artistic, she didn't have an ear for music, but she made a world for her uncle, cheery and bright. Benedickta heard footsteps. She had forgotten how fond she was of Emma. Benedickta felt a smile rise in her . . . but when the door opened, she faced a stranger. A magnetic storm started somewhere in her body. She threaded words carefully. "Where's Emma?"

"At the hospital."

"Then Harry . . ."

"We don't know. They don't tell us, miss."

Benedickta turned, signaling the taxi to wait while she jotted down the address. "Hurry," she told the driver.

It was uptown. The Hospital for Joint Diseases. Why joint diseases when he'd had a stroke? Probably it was a question of bed space.

The duty nurse wouldn't let her see him. "The doctor's in there now. It will be a few minutes."

"I've come across the ocean," Benedickta said.

"It will be a few minutes," the nurse repeated.

Benedickta sat on a vinyl couch. She watched a student nurse slip a card into a computer, and press a button. The girl looked at the tabulated result and, frowning, reinserted the card. Again the result did not please her, and she gave the computer a couple of resounding slaps with her open hand. The duty nurse without a word retrieved the card, turned it around and fed it into the machine. Why did she record this trivia, why was she sitting out here

in the hall? She went up to the desk once more. "I have to see Harry Osborn."

At that moment she heard her name called. It was Emma. Not the Emma she had left, but a shrunken Emma, her eyes orifices opening into her skull, the eyes of a vigil stander. The eyes of one who keeps a deathwatch.

Emma tried to clutch her, but Benedickta didn't want to be touched by her. Eluding her grasp, she entered the room, and Emma trailed after her. A doctor spoke in a low tone to the intern. A nurse stood beside them. Benedickta's eyes avoided the figure on the bed. She saw a monitor against the wall. She saw the stand at the head of the bed from which a bottle dangled. Tubes led to the patient. She took in these circumstances surrounding Harry, gathering courage to look directly at him. The years had worn and polished his features. The dusty gem was hewed, all contours sharpened as on hand-rubbed alabaster. Benka walked under the galleries and the massive rib vaulting without hesitation until she was opposite the organ. She was singing. *"Wann kommst du, mein Heil. Ich komme, dein Theil, ich komme!"* The Bach cantata flooded the room. With infinite compassion it spoke to the man on the bed. There was the slightest movement of attention. The music called. "Sleeper, wake!"

The notes swelled, the curved lips parted. "Benedickta . . ." She bent to hear. "Remember. Always, a glory finish."

It was a technical world. Machines knew. There was a change in the machine behind the bed. The doctor administered adrenaline. The defibrillator was swung into position. The intern said, "Stand clear," and brought the paddles against Harry Osborn's rib cage. The needle registered 400 joules. The narrow body almost sat up. Everyone watched—not the body, but the scanner. A dozen more shocks were delivered, convulsing the body, but with no effect on the monitoring device. Sweat fell from the intern's face to the alabaster face. The intern broke the rhythm and looked across at her.

"No!" Benedickta clutched one hand into the other and struck above Harry's heart where the electrodes were attached.

"It's no good," the intern said.

Again, bone and cartilage cracked under the blow.

"Stop her," Emma screamed, "she's breaking his ribs."

Benedickta came down once more with full force, counting as she would a musical phrase. Something gave farther under her palm.

A primitive high sound passed Emma's lips. She was on her like

a fury. Benedickta stood motionless against the assault without raising her hands. There was no blip on the machine, the trace was flat. The machine showed that Harry was dead.

Benedickta's speaking voice was surprisingly low; she used it to quiet Emma. The woman subsided. She looked around imploringly. Whether she silently asked those assembled to do something further, or to forgive her hysterics, there was no way to know. Her rage spent, she went timidly to the head of the bed.

Benedickta moved to her side. They were here, she knew it—Mark, Mother, Harry—with only herself standing on the wrong side of life. . . .

In the hall, Emma said. "It's in God's hands. There was nothing we could do."

The crowds called "*Bis!*" called "Brava!" She knew Harry was dying, but she stayed in Venice and sang an E flat in alt.

"He knew you came," Emma said, "he held on for that."

Swiftly in Benedickta's mind flashed the unselected alternative: herself by Harry's side this last week, willing her own young strength into him, not leaving him, helping Emma with sickroom tasks, being here, just being here.

"He was so proud of you," Emma said shyly, "we both were. We got the reviews you mailed. It was very kind of Madame Cecily to translate them. All the wonderful things they said about you!"

"I didn't know," Benedickta said. "I didn't think. It was Madame." There was a small silence. "I was saving them though, to show him when I came back."

Emma patted her hand. "You were very busy."

Benedickta laughed. Friend, mentor, first teacher—a worthy sacrifice to follow the first. Wolf said, "Music makes castrati of us all." It was true. She had used the knife on Mark, on Harry, and had not spared herself, so that her voice could ring out over Europe, over the world.

"Come back with me to the house," Emma said, "I couldn't go there alone."

Emma gave her the young Benedickta's room. She lay down in that Benedickta's bed. She remembered the night Mark died. Harry sat with her in this room, in that chair. And after a while she'd been able to talk about her brother.

This evening thirteen years later she went to Emma's room and performed the same service for her. It wasn't necessary to say much.

After about an hour, without preamble, Emma began to speak. Harry had taken her in when her mother died. She'd been happy making her home with him. She'd never tried for a life more centrally her own. Harry insisted she attend the church socials, but she was awkward and reserved with young people. She preferred to put her baking up for prizes and talk to the other women. Sometimes she was asked to dance, but it was a torment to her and she only did it for Harry's sake. Then, as she reached thirty, he no longer put her forward or insisted, but let her retiring nature find its own outlets. She loved church work, there were fund-raising benefits, and she always volunteered for office; currently she was treasurer. Benedickta felt her quiet pride in the brightening of her voice. The assertion of usefulness was her security.

There were stories about herself mixed into the ramblings. "At first you didn't recognize our friends at the church when we spoke of them. Then we realized you had a different way of remembering, you would imitate a voice placement perfectly and ask, 'Is that Patricia Carroll?' At first when you came to us, you were very quiet, just taking everything in . . . like having your soft-boiled eggs in a napkin ring, that was something new to you. You used to watch Harry to see how he tapped it open."

"I remember the napkin rings," Benedickta said, "they were silver and had the names of dead boys engraved on them. One said Willie and the other Morrie."

"That's right. My uncles. Willie died in a sled accident when he was twelve. The sled went into a trolley car. Morrie died in some war, I think it was one of the Mexican uprisings. He went to fight for the people. He was very idealistic."

Benedickta picked up the saga. "Willie was fair and beautiful, Morrie dark and handsome. Yes, I remember. I remember the spoons too, with dates and names on them. I loved to eat from those spoons."

"One was my mother's." It was odd to hear a woman of forty-three speak of her mother, dead a quarter of a century, as though she were in the next room. "And one belonged to Mother's sister Emma. I'm named for her. Mine has my birthdate on it. They don't do that anymore. But I always thought it was rather nice. One spoon has baby teeth marks, they were my grandmother's. I often think how strange it is that the everyday things we use and handle have a permanence to them that people don't. People just . . . He was well. Perfectly well one minute, and the next he toppled over,

clutching at his head, groaning. The doctor didn't want him moved. So I put him to bed here. He seemed to be responding to the medicine, the quiet. He wasn't able to speak, you know, and his left side was paralyzed. But yesterday he was better, there was some movement in his left hand. He could grasp a paper cup. His speech was hesitant and slurred, but returning. I thought the worst was over. Even Dr. White thought so. Then about noon he had another seizure. He was unconscious by the time we got him to the hospital." She sat silent, her body an opaque darker mass in the dark of the room. "Do you remember how I used to brush your hair? How filled with electricity it was?"

"It used to follow the brush, flying out after it . . . yes."

"Harry always said you had instinctive musicianship. Harry was never wrong about things like that. He not only knew music, he lived music. If he had been one to put himself forward, the world would have known Harry Osborn. But he was content. They let him prepare his own programs. Right from the beginning he said from the seed of your voice, as he first heard it, a great instrument would develop. . . . Do you remember the takeoffs you used to do on singers you heard on the radio? You had everyone rolling around in stitches. But Harry was able to control you. He was gentle but firm. He never let you get away with anything. 'Don't talk with your mouth full.' "

Benedickta smiled. " 'Don't make noise when you eat. Don't unfold your napkin all the way. Change your fork back to the other hand, and don't jab at the food as though you're spearing a rhino.' Harry had his work cut out with me."

They both laughed, forgetful for the moment. But the sun began to squeeze itself into the room. It was day. That cold beginning at which each is furthest from himself.

Benedickta stood up. "It's like the fifth of July. Everything's happened that's going to happen." She went to the casement and lowered the shade. "Try to get some sleep, Emma."

"Will you be able to sleep?"

"Of course." She kissed Emma briefly on the cheek, and went to her own room. She wrung out a towel in cold water and, lying down, placed it over her eyes. But her temples pulsated, and flares were going off in her head. Fifth of July fireworks . . . what can be more useless? She felt wide awake, but with a heaviness in her limbs, very much as when Madame gave her the sleeping pills. At times she

thought in Italian, at times in English. I'm back in New York, and of all the millions of rushing people, not one is Mark, not one is Harry. Even the conservatory seemed far away, an academy of music she had been liberated from into music itself. Wolf still kept his studio here, and many of his friends were here. She had almost known them.

There was someone. There was Jeff Hartley.

Amazing, there it was again—the shared sandwich, their talk in the restaurant. She heard the baritone quality of his voice, well placed, well modulated. He was a man who did not need to raise his voice, a man who, even then, three years ago, was listened to. "I am an agronomist," she heard him say it, "an assistant professor." By now, she supposed, he would be a full professor, someone renowned in his profession. She saw the person that had been Jeff Hartley as clearly as though he stood in the room. His eyes were hazel, nearsighted, framed by heavy-rimmed glasses.

But it had been three years. He was married, of course, a girl student who sat at the front of his class and took notes when he lectured. She was brilliant and very attractive. And she hadn't married someone else and gone away. She had stayed right here and taken her goddamned notes and married him. She had a baby. *She* was able to have babies, maybe even two.

It wasn't decision at a conscious level. She needed family, Mark, Harry, someone. For Emma she remained the adolescent, the perennial music student. Madame guarded and took care of the instrument, but of Benedickta she knew little. These were very limited views of her. She needed something else. The need had brought her across the ocean. It took charge. She left Emma a note saying she was going out. Her destination was the subway stop at 116th Street.

White tiles whizzed by. White was the color of mourning in some cultures. Mark must have told her that—it was just such odd bits of information Mark always knew about, it seemed appropriate though, black commingled all colors, from white everything was leached. She walked through Morningside Heights to the Columbia campus. He could be on sabbatical, or even at another university. Or it might be he had no classes today. Was this really someone she wanted to see, this Professor Hartley, with his attractive, intelligent wife and his two children? What chance had she of finding the young man who had leaned across the table so intently, peering

at her with nearsighted eyes framed in tortoiseshell, speaking to her about his life and hers?

The administration building was the obvious starting point. She thought an assistant dean might be a person to approach. The dean's secretary dealt with her request by pulling out an indexed loose-leaf volume and handing it to her. Benedickta was amazed, it was going to work. She ran her finger down the *H*'s and fairly near the top, because of the following *a*, was Hartley, the hours he taught, days, building and room number.

She glanced at the clock. He had been lecturing fifteen minutes. The same incurious secretary, who acted as though it was part of her duties to route young women to morning assignations with faculty, gave her directions. Benedickta had been prepared to say it was a personal matter of some urgency, but she wasn't asked.

She began to feel the strangeness of what she was doing. How would she handle it? Slip into a back row, and if he didn't notice or remember her, if he wasn't Jeff Hartley whom she had shared a sandwich with, she would go away. She felt as Elvira did in the first act of *I Puritani*. Lodged next to this uncertainty was a sure and certain belief that the person she was about to see *would* be Jeff and then what could she possibly say about turning up in his lecture room three years after meeting him? I was passing by— She laughed to herself, Why not? and hurried on.

There was something inhibiting about the utilitarian aspect of public buildings. This was the room. She stood before the plain oak door. Should she take the worn knob in her hand? Should she do this crazy thing? or walk back to the subway? She had nothing in common with Jeff Hartley. She had nothing in common with him three years ago.

But there was another Benedickta, at least she hoped so, one capable of being a person. And you couldn't be a person all by yourself.

She'd had this impulse before—when she telephoned him. She could talk to him. She had talked, but she had not listened.

Perhaps this time she would listen, although probably she wouldn't. And probably Jeff would have nothing special to say to her. It was three years and a husband later on her side—and who knew how many lifetimes on his. She could quite easily banish the agronomy grad student to the back of her mind, but not so easily

forgive herself if she did not open the door.

The lecturer glanced up and it was Jeff. He was the same person, she knew it in an instant. How well she remembered him.

She slipped into an empty seat. She did not choose a back desk, but came down front.

"So a world that cannot at present provide an adequate diet for many of its three billion people must feed twice that many in the year two thousand. The clue to feeding our increasing population is protein. People living on cereal diets are short of lysine and tryptophan. In order to secure balanced quantities of amino acids . . ." Had he recognized her? He had not paused, he had not smiled, he had not continued to look at her. He seemed preoccupied with percentages, increments, pilot studies and statistical results. These were the things he had been concerned with at their first meeting. In a way this reassured her. Yet it was disconcerting to have remembered someone, gone to the trouble of looking him up, to find yourself forgotten.

"The abdomen, Nietzsche tells us, is the reason one cannot take oneself to be a god. We are, in fact, completely subservient to the belly. We carry it around and feed it three times a day when possible. During World War Two, with England threatened by blockade, Dr. N. W. Pirie crushed juice from ordinary leaves, coagulating them with hot water. Letting photosynthesis work for him, he produced a dark-green solid somewhat the texture of cheese, with the flavor of hay, but extremely high in Vitamin A. It was impractical to produce on a large scale, but it gives you an idea of the possibilities."

It was comforting to listen. Even when she stopped listening, the words themselves were soothing, names of faraway Indian villages. "We have to make these items palatable. Saffron, for instance, is the lucky color, the color of holy men's robes. The point is, it's largely a matter of packaging. Let the new products be saffron-colored and half the battle is won."

His concerns were large concerns. He wanted to feed the world and color it saffron! Her mind roamed. She liked Jeff. She liked watching him. Even his movements were large, the front of the classroom from which he taught seemed too small for him. And his manner amused her, he rapped out facts as though accusing his listeners. Then, perhaps conscious of this, entered on explanations.

"What is needed is an international agribank to draw on in emergencies. Contributions should be pegged to the GNP of the developed nations. But most important are teams of agronomists in on-the-spot teaching centers." He dreamed dreams on a scale that reduced her world to fantasy and make-believe. Yet when she centered a note she was concerned with problems of delivery, of coloration, yes, even its ability to nourish. Survival, but only so you could climb . . . into the arts, into science, into music. Having settled in her own mind how her life fitted into this broader schema, she smiled into Jeff's face. But he was speaking of vanaspati, a vitamin-fortified oilseed-based fat, which could be used at lesser cost in place of the traditional ghee.

She didn't know if there was a graduate student or not, but his life didn't need hers. She was wrong to reach out from loneliness. Benedickta Roland knew what she was about when she sang, but she was not good at personal relationships. She shouldn't have tried. She was not sorry she had come. She felt somehow warmed and strengthened that the Indians would have something better than ghee. And she would take away the picture of someone positively doing something, personally spreading the word, an evangelist, a proselytizer of living. Perhaps that's what she really remembered and wanted. She had come filled with death. And the lecture and the man said, Life! It was good, a better feeling to take away.

The hour came to a close. Jeff talked right past it, and his class obediently sat still, but another group of students began filtering in. Jeff gave way. "Thursday then," he said. To each side of her, students stood up. Benedickta found herself momentarily trapped by her desk. She had flipped it across her lap automatically when she sat down, but now couldn't remember with what motion it was brought up.

"It's nice to see you, Benedickta."

She tried another approach to the metal hinge and the desk folded away to the side of the chair. "I thought I'd have to stay for the next lecture."

"Let's get a sandwich," he said. "Do you still divide them?"

She regarded him with dark eyes made ever darker by the expanding center. "That's an odd thing for you to remember."

"Try me further . . . melted cheese, right?"

"Don't Jeff. I might just start crying. And that would be pretty

ridiculous, over melted cheese, don't you think?"

He led the way out of the room and took a shortcut down a side corridor. They emerged into sun. "I knew I'd see you again," he said.

"I didn't think you recognized me."

"I saw you come in."

"I've been living abroad. I just got back to New York yesterday. I don't know what impelled me to . . ."

He stopped her. "Does it matter?"

She tried to laugh, but it was shaky. "I always seem to associate you in my mind with some sort of crisis."

"Like getting married?"

"Yes. I'm not married anymore. Are you?"

He looked surprised. "No. But then I never was."

"I thought, that is, I pictured a very intellectual young lady."

"No young lady." He smiled across the space between them. "At least no particular one. And what is the current crisis, getting divorced?"

"That wasn't a crisis. No, my teacher died, Harry Osborn, the best person I ever knew, except my brother. I stood beside his bed and sang 'Sleepers, Wake!' and he did, he did wake for a moment. He said my name. Now all the important people in my life are dead."

"Who?"

"Mark, and my mother."

"Let's walk awhile."

"All right."

He reached out and took her hand. She realized they had never touched, not even shaken hands. He had a good hand, a strong hand, it engulfed hers. "My hands are like my mother's. I remember hers on the keyboard. Like a bird, diving, attacking; birds defend their nests with movements like hers. I liked your lecture."

"Did you? Did it interest you?"

"It impressed me. Most people—I guess I mean myself—don't think about things like that except when something happens and there's mass starvation somewhere. It's reassuring to know there are people who make themselves responsible. That was a good quote, about our stomach reminding us we're not gods."

"How is your music coming?"

"Well. I was a big success in Venice."

"I thought Milan was the opera capital."

"It is."

He smiled. "Of course, you're very young."

"For a singer, perhaps. Not for a woman. I had a baby."

"You have a child?"

"It didn't live. It didn't even have time to be important to me, and yet it was."

"Is that why your marriage broke up, because of the child?"

"No."

"Don't tell me anything you don't want to. I'm only asking questions to find out where you are."

"Well, when you figure it out, I wish you'd tell me. I guess on the optimistic side, I have a career ahead of me. It's very exciting, preparing new roles. It's a tremendous challenge. Last season I did Elvira. Do you know *I Puritani*? It's not done often. It was a great chance for me."

"But your personal life?"

She smiled at him brightly. "Let's get that sandwich, shall we?"

To erase three years they divided it.

"I'm an associate professor now, I could even take you to dinner."

"No," Benedickta said quickly. "I never want to do things like that with you."

"Like what?" Jeff was puzzled.

"Like . . . you know, have dates. Do usual things."

"And what would an unusual thing be?"

"Oh, what we've been doing, walking. Maybe along the river. It's a stony sort of park, but I like it."

"I like it too."

She finished her half of the sandwich. Outside they took their bearings and started toward Riverside Drive.

"My brother used to tell me, 'Remember who you are.' That gave a continuity to being me when everything around me kept changing. You see, we were farmed-out kids, poor. It killed Mark, the heavy work killed him. But it never killed the way he thought and felt. He lived a different life from the one he seemed to live. He knew how to survive in the wilds, and he almost made it in the tenements. . . . We had our escape route to the roofs. And he'd tell me stories of all the books he'd read. Even when he was dying he had a plan to

go to California, he thought the mountains would make him well. He had a cabin picked out. He was dying, but he wouldn't quit, in his mind he was living."

Jeff nodded, following what she was saying. "Do you feel guilty, Benedickta? Being alive, being successful?"

"No, oh, no, not guilty. I have a responsibility to make my life successful. Can you understand that?"

"For Mark?"

"For all of them, Mark, Mother, Harry."

"You've been very successful for such a young singer."

"Yes. I was a wonderful Elvira, and Madame's trying to get Norma for me. I know how to work on these lives, Jeff. But a real life, my own . . . I don't know what to do about me. The curtain comes down, you know. It comes down every night."

"Are you telling me there aren't dozens of people who want to know you, to be allowed some part of your life, your time?"

"They don't count, Jeff. They're random people, miscellaneous people. It's the illusion they want, not me."

"So you came to my classroom?"

"Yes."

They had stopped to look at each other. Suddenly his arm went around her and the breath went out of her. She was holding it so as not to let go of the moment. Without saying anything he reversed direction. Benedickta began to hum under her breath. Jeff was startled at the textured sound, not a single thread, but many woven together.

Home for Jeff was a room with books, staggered columns on the table, rows along the windowsill; there were even books on top of the refrigerator. The bath was a converted closet which had gone through many changes. At present it held a metal sink in which socks were soaking.

"How atrocious," Benedickta said gleefully.

They rolled onto the bed, already a tangle of arms and legs. At first his kisses were experimental, then they tasted, and then— She felt his life flowing in him and in her. At the same instant identity was gone, the tides of their bodies one.

Her grasp was spasmodic. Then she relaxed, her fingers became tender, they stroked lightly.

"Why did we have to wait three years, Benedickta?"

"Because I'm crazy. Do you think you could come to love a crazy woman?"

He smiled. "That's ancient history. I've loved you since day one. That isn't carbon dating, the new method is B.B. and A.B., before and after Benedickta."

She found a spot she had not kissed at the base of his throat.

He leaned over to look at her. "I've tried to decide for three years exactly what you look like. But I see now I'll never make up my mind."

"You were one of the things I didn't think about, Jeff. Any stray thought of you I pushed away. Except . . ."

"Except?"

"When I was carrying the child and things were bad with Wolf—I wished you were the father. Can you understand that?"

"I think so. We both knew what happened when we met."

"Why did I go ahead with Wolf? Why didn't I slow down?"

"You couldn't. And that's something we'll have to come to terms with. Your talent is demanding. Sometimes it rides you."

"We have such different lives," she moaned.

"Perhaps that isn't important."

She snuggled against him, but she could tell he was figuring things out. "What I'd like, Benedickta, is the chance to be with you, to feel our way, see if we can make it work." He laughed suddenly—a private laugh. He was sharing a joke with himself.

She tugged at him, feeling left out. "What?" she demanded.

"I always thought someday I'd look up from tomato blight or a fungus and there she'd be . . ."

"The girl of your dreams?"

He shook his head dolefully, "No blight, no fungus . . . it happened over a melted cheese sandwich."

"It did happen, Jeff?" she asked anxiously.

"It did."

She traced the pattern of short auburn hair on his chest. "Shall I call Emma—that's Harry's niece—and make up an excuse so I can stay overnight?"

"Sure. But I have an early class."

"Just think, I'll be here when you get back."

Jeff stretched his arms behind his head. "You know, I'm a pretty ordinary guy. You may be too much for me."

"You're not ordinary. I won't have you say that. You're dedicated, and you're wonderful. Haven't other women told you that?"

"What other women?"

"I don't know, but you do. There have been other women?"

"Nothing permanent."

"People aren't permanent, Jeff. There's no such thing as permanent people."

She said nothing more and he thought she had fallen asleep, but an involuntary movement betrayed her. "Are you crying, Benedickta?"

"Yes."

His arms tightened about her. "You should cry for your teacher."

"He was more than a teacher. He saved my life. He sent me to the conservatory. He . . . he was a fine musician. He knew every Bach chorale the way an engineer might know a city from studying the blueprints, where all the pipes are and the little back roads, as well as the main arteries. He taught me to really read. . . ." She meant music, but forgot to say it.

Jeff understood. "I've had teachers like that. I hope to *be* a teacher like that."

"Do you know something, Jeff, I told you about Mark. I never tell anyone about Mark. And I've been able to explain to you what Harry meant to me. That must mean I want you to know me. And I want to know you. Now, this minute." She pushed back a strand of errant reddish hair from his forehead. "Tell me the first thing that comes into your mind."

"Okay. I hate people who tell me the plot of movies. Now it's your turn."

"You want to know something about me? All right." She considered a moment. "I thrive on the vowel AH."

"You thrive on it?"

"Yes, I do."

He threw back his head and laughed. "And I thrive on you."

She was used to waking in unfamiliar places. But this was no drowsy awakening. The first streak of consciousness said, "Harry is dead." Said, "You have changed continents." Said, "You have a lover." Last night she knew fully what that meant. Until then she had only sung about it.

She glanced idly at the room. There was no hint of Jeff in it. He

didn't live here. He slept here, bathed and sometimes ate here. Not this morning. He had not gotten breakfast for fear of waking her. The closet door stood slightly ajar as though he had reached for a clean shirt. She could see a few things hanging there, not this year's styles or even last year's. He was a man who filled himself with the needs of the world. His own wants were sparse. The only personal touch was the books. And from each book dozens of cards stuck out. Getting up, she crossed the rom and opened a dilapidated volume at a crisp yellow marker. It was like talking to him. "Diseases of bean . . . root rot, bean beetles, the bean-pod borer, anthracnose."

Yes, this was Jeff.

She read on. "Stunt disease affects corn from southern Texas to Mexico. . . . Cadang-cadang virus, coconuts, Philippines. Caribbean, sugar corn stunt. Moko . . . bananas."

She pulled out another book, opening at random. "Chile exports bulk of nitrates in spite of local need." She replaced the card carefully and removed another. "Genetic techniques of tissue culture . . . making feasible wide crosses among crop species and even genera."

She wanted to love such a man. And found it wonderful that she did. Had she always loved him? Had she always known? When she married another man, when she carried his child? Yes, certainly then. But perhaps much earlier. Like the afterimage on the retina with the object no longer before you, in such a fashion Jeff had been with her. And this she had concealed from herself.

. . . I am a fatal, or perhaps a fateful person, she told herself, looking in the glass at her dark, bold features. She was taking again. Jeff was an effort to restore balance to her life, to fight death. But she felt capable of giving too. She wanted that chance.

Harry's death kept confronting her, but it was supportable now. She was not a castrato. Passion flowed in her, Jeff reached for her and she became whole. She showered, dressed, had coffee and began to vocalize.

Someone thumped on the ceiling and yelled down to stop that caterwauling. She continued with her exercises, correct vowel placement, a minimum of breath. Harry would have enjoyed this session, it had been a long time since he'd heard her.

More thumping overhead. Benedickta opened the window. She would educate that bad-tempered ignoramus. There was beauty even in scales when the notes were well placed.

"I'll call the cops," the irate neighbor screamed.

Benedickta grinned and projected as she would over a hundred-piece orchestra.

"You're disturbing the peace with that racket."

Benedickta gunned to top C. It was effortless, it was beautiful. Her voice poured like honey.

When Jeff returned they met each other shyly in the middle of the room, asking silently about this thing that had happened between them . . . had it happened for the other? And in the same way? Though they paused well away from each other, it was the drawing back of an arrow.

Who moved first? Neither was sure. They were hungry, playful, teasing. Then there was urgency become need. In a rectangle of sun on a threadbare carpet they brought each other down. It was like reaching an unbearable note and holding.

"I never knew," she whispered. "Can you believe that I had a child, almost. And I never knew what it was."

"I guess that can happen."

"Jeff, I've been thinking about Emma, the house will be filling up with those dreadful cut flowers and cards. I'll have to go back and help her through this. I can now."

"Okay. Just give me a chance to shower."

She looked at him incredulously. "You're coming with me?"

"Of course."

"But that's an awful thing to ask of someone."

"You didn't ask me."

He disappeared into the bathroom and she leaned against the door. "You're a very nice person, Jeff." After a pause she volunteered, "I'm not. Did you know that? I'm not a very nice person."

He came out, toweling, and began to dress. "You're a special person Benedickta. To me you're a magical person."

They took the subway and then walked, the city of Pants Cleaned While You Wait and Chock Full O' Nuts led them on, colorful, sleazy, jumbled, full of the smell of fast foods and the clap of change on counters. Jeff wanted to stop, he hadn't had breakfast.

"You can't. Emma would be heartbroken. She's a wonderful cook." So they left the downtown matrix, entering side streets along which were rows of brownstones. Benedickta stopped before one of them. Confrontation with the past hit her and she sat suddenly on the stoop. "I can't believe it. I can't believe he's dead." A moment

later she jumped to her feet. She took his arm. "Come on, you'll like Emma."

Emma was as neatly dressed as on any other day. She had found containers for an assortment of flowers; a pile of black-trimmed cards were on a tray in the entry. It was an organized bereavement. But her eyes were cored hollow. She showed no surprise at meeting Jeff, although she must have wondered where and from what period in Benedickta's life he came. She assumed that only old and close friends would be brought to the house now, so she treated him as one of the family. "People have dropped in from the church. I've baked and they've brought things too."

"We haven't eaten all day, Emma, I wouldn't let Jeff stop on the way."

"Oh, well, then." Emma brightened at the prospect of stepping into her lifelong role, that of looking after someone. Harry once said of her, "Emma loves in a special way, her love is functional. She expresses it by doing for people. Me, for instance—and you." Benedickta could see there was release for her in the bustle and preparation of the meal, and recognized her real pleasure when she discovered there was homemade marmalade left to serve with the steaming omelette. Jeff, because he ate twice as much as Benedickta, stole her heart. And when she discovered he was an agronomist with a professional interest in food, the shy, reticent woman opened up. She told him of the root cellar in her girlhood home in which her mother kept the bulbs for spring planting.

Benedickta curled into a corner of the sofa, her head against one of Emma's embroidered doilies, content to listen . . . feeling new warmth as she found constantly more things to love in Jeff. Emma didn't perceive the compassion behind his interest in her prizes for baking and cake decoration. He was careful about that.

As the afternoon wore on, Emma recollected that one of the ladies from the church, a Mrs. Hamilton, brought something that she thought might be served just about now, "a delicious punch."

"Spiked?"

Emma again perked up at the tone of raillery. "For you, my boy," and she led the way to the pantry, which yielded, after a certain amount of searching, a dusty bottle of bourbon.

"For medicinal purposes?" Jeff asked.

"I don't know where you get an idea like that," she retorted briskly. "A nip or two never hurt anyone."

Jeff put himself in charge of doctoring the punch. "It's sacrilegious, in a way. What do you say to having a round of the best, undiluted?"

To Benedickta's amazement Emma agreed. And when more of the congregation called, she introduced Jeff as "Benedickta's young man."

The morning of the funeral Emma got out an old photograph album, and asked Benedickta to sit on the couch with her as she turned the pages. There they were, Harry, Emma and a young, slender, dark-haired girl that she had difficulty remembering as herself. Although she remembered other things. In some of the early black-and-white prints she recalled the color of the dress she wore. The days too were before her in an uncanny way. This one spent at Central Park, she leaning across the scrolled ironwork bridge. From that height the water looked clean, and behind it loomed trees and the towers of the Beresford. That was the day she received notification that she was admitted to the conservatory. What a homely, blissful smile, all teeth and hope. Quickly she turned the page to another day.

Jeff escorted them to the service. Benedickta sang a Bach they had done many times, "Out of the Depths I Cry to Thee." When she closed her eyes, his hands spanned the keys, his feet worked the pedals. "Relax the jaw," he would tell her, "open the throat." When she returned to her seat it all seemed alien to her. The neatly arranged flowers covering the casket, the rows of mourners had nothing to do with Harry. When the music ended, he ended. There was nothing left to feel. She glanced at Emma and saw satisfaction in her face. The large turnout from the church measured her uncle's worth. The floral displays were generous. He had been valued.

Benedickta clenched her teeth. None of these good folk dreamed of the music locked in that lonely old man who played for their worship, was available for a marriage or a bazaar, a fund-raising, or a commemorative service. Only she knew the passionate landscape he wandered in.

*. . . the moment in and out of time*
*The distraction fit, lost in a shaft*
*of sunlight.*
*The wild thyme unseen, or the winter*

*lightning,*
*Or the waterfall, or the music heard so deeply*
*That it is not heard at all, but you*
*are the music*
*While the music lasts.*

The ride to the cemetery, the interment, were displacements of time and equally unreal to her. They returned to the flat with Emma, who busied herself with supper, not allowing Benedickta to help. She was anxious to talk. She questioned Jeff more closely about his work, and he replied in terms that made her feel he was engaged in much the same effort that she and the parishioners at St. Anne's were, only on a global scale, of course.

"I've always said there's nothing nobler than feeding the poor." Emma said.

"Except making it possible for them to feed themselves."

She smiled at him absently. "Yes, of course."

It was this smile that worried Benedickta. There was nothing behind it. There was nothing behind Emma. She confided her worry to Jeff.

"She's tougher than you think."

"Is she?"

"Of course. She has faith."

Benedickta pondered his reply. She knew it was true. She had worshiped for years alongside Harry and Emma, but as she realized now . . . without belief.

Emma believed she would be reunited with Harry. Benedickta knew she had lost again to death.

She received a letter from Madame, saying that La Fenice was prepared to produce *Norma* and offer her a contract. Rosa Ponselle had been the last of the great Normas. But Benedickta knew it could be her role, dramatic and awesome. She and Madame had already dug into it. The long D-minor phrase of Act III filled her head.

Of course she would talk over her decision with Jeff. He had mentioned a sabbatical coming up. Why not take it in Venice? He could correlate the statistics he was compiling there. And if it was necessary for him to fly off for a week or so to some remote spot, why not? She began to hum the D-minor phrase. Perhaps they could find the same gondolier.

She reread Madame's letter. From Venice perhaps she could move to the larger houses, even La Scala itself. The Druid priestess Norma was a unique acting role. For Benedickta there was no differentiation between acting and singing, it was all one, an expression of the music, a means of reliving her life. Often this was hard, sometimes it was fun, sometimes terrible. You listened and the music told you what to do. She folded Madame's letter away until she found the right moment to speak to Jeff. He had invited her and Emma for a weekend on Fire Island. She decided to keep her news till then.

It was an old two-story house set well back on dunes with hillocks of grass and the sea stretching in front. The place had belonged to Jeff's grandparents and he opened it whenever he could manage a long weekend. The sun had not come out and the seascape was gray and bleak.

The young people went in search of driftwood in the hope of getting a good blaze going. Jeff jumped from the top of a slope and Benedickta raced down, hurtling against him. They tumbled over in the sand. When she tried to sit up she found his arms around her. "Benedickta, do you know what the most romantic words in the world are?"

"Not I love you?"

"No. The U. S. Agency for International Development."

"That's romantic?"

He nodded. "They've set up a pilot program, the Valle de Bravo Plan, in Mexico, and invited me to head it up. We'll be married right away and leave the end of the month. What do you say?"

"For Mexico?"

"It's a pioneering effort, a crash program for self-sufficiency. Except for me and a couple of assistants, the staffing will be local."

She tried to take it in. "With you to guide it, to be in charge?"

"In the beginning."

"It's a wonderful opportunity, isn't it?"

"To be involved in something like this? Fantastic. The grant money's just come through, and the project coincides with my sabbatical."

Benedickta jumped to her feet, "Catch me," she called, and darted along the sand. Jeff overtook her, laughing, and walked back with her into the wind. "Tell me more about it, Jeff."

"Well, we'll be experimenting with new varieties of winter and spring wheats. And forage crops that will rotate with these. And,

of course, I'll be teaching soil management. The idea is for this to lead to 'hub' programs, splinter groups, trained by us, that will act in an advisory capacity wherever they're needed, at first in Mexico, later throughout the world, India, Chile, Africa . . . always involving local people, so as to leave behind a teaching core educated in modern farming methods."

"It sounds very exciting. Very." She turned and hugged him.

"But?" he said, watching her shrewdly.

"No, no buts. It's wonderful. And they chose you to run it. That's especially wonderful."

"It would mean five months in Valle de Bravo. That's not too long for you to be away, is it?"

"I don't think so. The important thing with a voice is to keep working it. I can do that anywhere."

"Perhaps we could send for Madame Cecily to coach you."

"In the wilds of Mexico? I don't see it."

"Maybe you could get an engagement in Mexico City. She might be able to arrange it."

"She might."

"Why not write her?"

"Good idea, I will."

"Then it will work?"

"Of course it will, Jeff."

"Well"—he grinned at her—"we'd better pick up some wood if we're going to have a fire."

Jeff's theory of starting a blaze was elaborate. The fire had to breathe, which meant the base logs were laid above the hearth on other branches from which an edifice slowly rose, cross-braced with kindling. The fire transformed the room, lighting the dark wood paneling, revealing the patterns of grain, picking up rosy hues.

From the meager supplies they had stopped for, Emma concocted a nutmeg eggnog on which Jeff felt he could improve. Disappearing into the kitchen, he returned with brandy Alexanders.

"It's a good thing I've started dinner," Emma declared after draining her glass.

"You're not supposed to gulp them," Jeff said, "you still have one to go."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. You have to drink a toast to Benedickta and me, we're getting married."

Emma got up, perhaps a bit too solemnly, and kissed them. "I knew it. When?"

They looked at each other, they didn't know. "As soon as we can arrange it," Jeff said.

"At St. Anne's," Benedickta added.

"Bless you both. I wish Harry were here to know it. He never did approve of the maestro."

"We'll be going to Mexico," Jeff said.

"Mexico? For a honeymoon?"

"To set up an agrarian station." Benedickta smiled at Jeff. He was stretched out before the fire, his head in her lap, watching the embers as they exploded.

Emma served supper on trays and retired discreetly afterward.

"It was nice of you to bring her down here, Jeff. She's so lost without Harry."

"I think she should be a permanent part of the household, don't you?"

"I don't know, St. Anne's is a big part of her life."

When consulted on her future, Emma opted for a family. "The house seems empty now."

Privately Benedickta laughed with Jeff. "I don't believe she thinks we could make it without her."

"We probably couldn't."

The marriage promise was made at St. Anne's. It was without music. The organ stood mute.

The party, consisting of Jeff, Benedickta, Emma and two assistants, assembled in Mexico City. Professor Jensen was pleasant and easygoing. Donna, whom Benedickta took to be his wife, was crisp, with little small talk.

A Jeep and car had been provided. They filled up with the noxious unfiltered gasoline that guaranteed engine trouble and drove west into high plateau country. The station was twenty kilometers past Toluca. Benedickta exclaimed at the sight of a lake splashed with shadings of dark green.

Jeff judged by other criteria. His practiced eye saw depleted earth, the erosion of topsoil, centuries of mismanagement. Several wealthy families had summer homes scattered about the lake. But for the most part it was a farming community, where methods, Jeff assured her, dated from the Stone Age. Malnutrition was apparent in the general lethargy of the population. Young men stood idly on the crumbling main street, waiting for something to happen. Nothing ever did. Not until the arrival of the *norteamericano* scientists.

A rented *casa* served as a base and office, as well as home. Much of the work, however, was carried on from tents set up at the test site. Donna Mercer, it turned out, was a professor in her own right. When she was convinced Benedickta's mistake had been an honest one and not a put-down, she became friendly. She was an efficient, short-cropped, slender woman in her midforties, who rose at five-thirty to jog ten miles before starting her day.

Jeff was up at that time too to pore over the field reports. When Benedickta rose at nine everyone was gone except Emma, who oversaw the tenant family that went with the *casa*. They were to cook

the meals, lay in wood and do the cleaning. But once Emma discovered the state of the pots and pans from which the meals were dished, she banished Antonia and took over her duties. "You wouldn't believe it," she said to Benedickta. "I don't think they've ever been washed, let alone scrubbed."

Benedickta vocalized for two hours in the morning, and waited to see if Jeff would get back for lunch. Generally, he didn't. So she hiked over to the tent station, the area behind which had already been plowed. Jeff hoped to draw a nucleus of several hundred local farmers, but at the most there were two dozen come to see the new machines and hear the gringo professor.

Jeff stood at a wood table on which were a series of labeled boxes. He spoke in a fluent Spanish that Benedickta didn't know he possessed. There were so many things to learn about Jeff.

He waved, and she smiled back, attempting to translate the Spanish into Italian, but the technical nature of the subject defeated her. Dr. Bruce Jensen whispered a rapid summary. "He's saying that you can't just dump on fertilizer. You can get less yield if you do."

"What's in those little boxes?"

"Seeds. The one to the right is triticale, a cross between wheat and rye. What's been done, actually, is to collect thousands of grain varieties from around the world. And through genetic engineering, combine favorable qualities. There's a wheat-soy blend, for instance. And we've got something we're going to try here, a wheat developed for a temperate climate. Its characteristics are earliness, short stature, stiff straw and high yield."

"You're going to grow that here?"

"Yes. Jeff is quite excited about its possibilities."

"I'll just go outside a bit and look around." The tent was oppressive and she had to get out. . . . Fields cultivated by American machines and newly dug irrigation ditches stretched before her. What am I doing here? she thought. Dear God, help me. She had no function, she was in the way, she didn't understand what was going on. And she had written Madame declining Norma.

Declining Norma, that she had worked over, beading and matching notes, practicing the agogic accent, giving a note of the same pitch and volume as its neighbor more emphasis by prolonging it slightly. Refining her messa di voce. Learning the liquid sound that seemed to float the voice. Her work on the portamento, the fioriture, to achieve consistency. She had run out on her life to be with Jeff.

And Jeff didn't need her. That's what she hadn't seen in the States, because the routine of classes and teaching was not this demanding. But here he came into his own, tramping the fields with small groups of agronomists, pinching the soil, crumbling a stalk, examining a tassel for color, checking the stem for rust fungi, enemy of his wheat. She had never known there were so many blights and wilts and viruses.

That night, as they were gathered around the long table, Emma served up a meal she might have prepared in her own kitchen instead of taking it from *estufa mala*, the great cast-iron wood stove. The latest World Health Organization bulletin was discussed. There was an item on oil-based foods in the issue. This was one of Jeff's main interests. "I don't think the article goes far enough. Ninety percent of all new foods will have an oilseed base. Oil *is* food and we are squandering it for transportation.

"Is this very dull for you, Benedickta?" he asked suddenly.

They all looked at her, the outsider, the wife of the boss, the singer.

"Maybe you will sing something for us at the cookout Friday night," Donna said kindly.

Jeff laughed. "Is 'Home on the Range' in your repertoire, Benedickta?"

"Maybe not. But I've been paging through the Carl Sandburg *Songbag* you brought along. There are some lovely folk songs. I'm learning some as a surprise."

"I understand," Dr. Jensen said, "that you did some singing in Italy?"

They were trying to include her, she saw that. "Yes, I . . ."

"The oilseed extender you spoke of, that's textured protein, isn't it?" Donna arrested her fork to ask.

"Yes, it's isolated and spun into fiber that can be fabricated into meat products."

That night Jeff whispered, "Sing me one of my surprises."

Softly she began, "When the curtains of night are pinned back by the stars . . ."

He was quiet moments after she had finished the love song, as though hearing it again in his head. "Thank you. It seems to be a time for present giving. Look outside your window in the morning."

"Will there be a present there? What present?"

"You'll see."

It was good to snuggle against him and she forgot the frustrations of the day. In the morning a quarter horse with Spanish leather saddle was tethered beneath her window. Benedickta frowned a long time at the horse.

Goddamn Jeff and his complacency. While he was arranging things for everyone else, he took time out—not much—to buy her contentment. Well, some things were not for sale. By now she was dressed and had gone outside, where she walked slowly around the animal. It was cropping grass and paid no attention to her. Anger propelled her onto its back. It was a scramble, Benedickta had never been on a horse in her life. But if you are going to fling a gift back in someone's face, it was necessary to have it with you. She clutched the reins in both hands and the mane as well. Even so she bounced around a good deal.

It was a brown-and-white mare. But she could not allow her life and career to be purchased by bulging brown eyes—no matter how liquid and appealing. Her discontent was precious to her. It was necessary to be impatient, to want to flex the voice in a new role, stretch her artistry, make it cover more.

And it could. She loved and was loved since she had sung last. A secret hoard of new and delicious knowledge was there to draw on; intimate notes that had not been part of her before could be summoned now at will.

Each morning as she tested her instrument, another test was taking place. Would they do *Norma* without her? Who would be cast? Although she tortured herself with these questions, she refused to believe in their validity. How could someone else sing with her inward phrasing, her shading, her intonation? It was impossible. Which meant the role would be done differently, interpreted in another manner. Here was torment of another kind. There was only one true Norma—and she, Benedickta, had evoked her. Each morning she bound her own nature more closely to that of the pagan priestess. And all this she repressed.

Until this morning she felt Jeff understood. But if he thought a horse could compensate for Norma, then wasn't he her father purchasing the nine-foot Baldwin concert grand? Alexandra too was expected to be happy, to sit and play and forget a career, forget to lay claim to what was hers.

She was sitting the saddle better . . . gripping with her knees, no longer sliding and bumping around. She released the animal's

mane and patted her. It wasn't her fault. She was a pretty horse. Guapa would be a nice name if she kept her—which she had no intention of doing. She was not to be coaxed from misery. She hugged it to her. How could she not be furious when Jeff bribed her to be happy?

It was time she spelled it out for him. Valle de Bravo was a sacrifice of her time, her art and her self. It was an utterly barren existence, and she was here for one reason only, out of love. He should understand that and not try to ameliorate the situation with baubles you'd give a child to keep her quiet. Didn't he realize this was her love she was giving him? How could he dilute it with Guapa? Her hand rested on the long head, hot with sun, and soft to stroke. Abruptly she withdrew it.

Why had she thought of her father? Why had she compared Jeff to him? That was wicked, vicious. Jeff wasn't like that. He hadn't meant it like that.

Benedickta pulled up in front of the tent and the whole crew took a break to come out and admire Guapa. She noticed attendance was up. There were over a hundred people, including three observers from the University of Mexico who had been invited to dinner.

Jeff's face when he came over to her was full of pleasure at seeing her on the horse. "Do you like her? She's pretty, isn't she?"

"Oh, Jeff." It was all so different from what she had thought. Jeff, busy as he was, saw into her isolation and devised ways to make things more pleasant. And she, with her penchant for convoluting the most straightforward interchange, had twisted it into something monstrous. How could she be like that? "Oh, Jeff," she said again.

"I'm glad you like her."

"I love her."

"Have you named her?"

"Guapa."

"Guapa, that's perfect." He told the others and they agreed she had chosen well.

Dinner was mostly a lecture. "Think of it this way," Jeff told his guests. "We are immersed in an invisible sea of microorganisms. This sea is as important as those that surround the continents. Speculation can be endless. We know the soil-living microorganisms fix the nitrification complex. And that they intervene in copper,

sulfur, manganese. We are guessing that they can be pitted against each other and possibly synthesized into compounds that may protect against cancer and aging. But much more needs to be known, and many more students, such as yourselves, brought into agriculture. Only four percent of students in developing countries enter the field most vital to them. This has to be reversed."

Benedickta waited until bed. That was her time with him. Since he was up at five-thirty, it was brief. "Jeff . . ."

"Hmmm?"

"The only living thing I ever had was Cara, my canary. Madame is keeping her for me. Can we take Guapa back with us? Keep her on Fire Island?"

"Sure. Benedickta, this hasn't turned out to be a honeymoon, has it? I guess I didn't realize all that was involved."

"I know it needs to be done, Jeff. And I'm proud that you're doing it."

"Is it hard for you, sort of lying fallow like this?"

She smiled at his expression. "It isn't all that long. In three months we'll be back in New York. And I'll try to persuade Madame to join me."

"Have you heard from her?"

"No," Benedickta admitted, "but you know what the mails are here. The burro express. Darling . . . ?" But she could tell by his breathing that he was asleep. She reached over carefully to look at him, the closed eyes with their stubble of short lashes, the tangle of sandy hair, the good straight nose that meandered a bit to the side, the mouth, stern in sleep, but opening to hers. . . . Good night, my darling.

Benedickta formed a resolve. She would not be on the periphery of things here. She would make a place for herself, become part of the group. And so, after her morning practice and ride, she shut herself up in the house with textbooks and technical journals. It was slow going—but she felt she was, if not absorbing, at least becoming familiar with the terms. From a manual on plant diseases she learned about blister rust. During her afternoon ride she explained it to Guapa. "My love of a love of a Guapa, I must tell you, the fungus most prevalent in Mexico is called black rust. Ominous sort of name, isn't it? Like the black plague . . . Jeff dreads it and guards his wheat against it with increased nutrients. Then he discovered he was overfeeding the plants and this tended to 'lodge'

them. And 'lodge,' my friend, simply means there is too much leaf and they drag the plant down and energy that should appear in the grain is spent in the foliage." Guapa jerked her head as though nodding and Benedickta laughed.

She returned to her reading and committed to memory the protein content of pulses, corn and wheat. Apparently protein was determined by amino acids. These seemed to be a series of chemicals. The author often referred to the height of the amino acid bar. Yeasts and plankton were also sources of protein.

All this she stored away and she watched for her opportunity. It came about a week later, after the evening meal during that short period they sat around before bed. Donna was saying that immigrants change their language, their clothes and their manners, but maintain old food habits to the end.

Benedickta nodded. There was no way she could interject her newly acquired knowledge at this point. But Jeff gave her the opening she'd been waiting for. "By the way, the last shipment of grain samples arrived today. Now we can start the recombinatory process."

Benedickta jumped in, her voice glowed with enthusiasm. "That's marvelous, Jeff. I suppose you will be increasing the protein in casavas as well?"

Jeff was impressed, and nodded. "Yes, that's certainly an objective."

She was spurred on to ask, "And will you be able to increase the tryptophan in wheat and the lysine in corn?"

There was a general burst of laughter. It wasn't meant to be unkind. Jeff kissed her lightly on top of her head. "Good try, but you got it backward. Wheat—lysine. Corn—tryptophan."

"So what?" she asked stormily. "So what lousy, goddamned difference does it make?"

Everyone looked at her—Bruce, Donna, Emma. Even Jeff was surprised and distressed.

She was distressed as well. She had raised her voice, tears flooded her eyes . . . over what? Amino acids! She must be losing her mind. She laughed shakily and at the first opportunity excused herself. Jeff followed. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

She denied it and they made love. It was the only way left of coming together. But it was so good that she didn't mind. Jeff's body was a golden shaft. She quivered and danced upon it. And afterward slept curled against him. She dreamed the world was held

together by a gigantic vine whose roots turned black with fungus.

Benedickta was having breakfast when Donna came in from her jog and disappeared into the shower. Benedickta detested that shower. On a good morning it produced a thin stream of tepid water. She heard Guapa outside champing to be off. She had become a creditable rider during the last week, and the morning canter was something they both looked forward to. She usually took a picnic basket and ended up at the station, in this way capturing more time with Jeff. At the window a small brown bird twittered. She was reminded of Cara. She quickly closed down that train of thought.

Donna came into the room, toweling her hair.

"You're on a late schedule today," Benedickta observed, as she rarely had company at breakfast.

"Any *huevos rancheros* left?"

"On the sideboard. And there's a pot of honey, it's delicious."

Donna filled her plate and sat down with Benedickta. "I'm not actually on a later schedule. I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh?" Benedickta was surprised.

"Jeff asked me not to, and generally . . ."

"Jeff?"

"Yes, the project's been given official blessing. The powers that be want a permanent installation that will train and send out teams. They've asked us to stay on for a five-year term."

"Five years?" When you're hit hard you don't feel anything, not right away. She must remember that for future roles.

Donna was saying, "Jeff plans to refuse the appointment."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes, he did."

"Thanks, Donna. I'm glad you told me."

"Well." Donna set down a mug of coffee. "I'm on my way. Can I give you a lift?"

". . . Ah, no. No, thanks. I've got to exercise Guapa." Benedickta went out shortly after Donna, forgetting the picnic Emma had prepared.

Emma called after her.

"Oh, sorry."

"You know what I found at the market? The smallest jar of peanut butter I've ever seen. You and Jeff are having peanut butter sandwiches."

"Thanks, Emma." She turned Guapa's head, riding faster than

usual, riding as though pursued. She took the fork to the waterfall. Reining in the horse, she watched a torrent plunge in braided patterns over rocks. Fine spray misted the air and wet her face. Guapa pawed the muddied earth. "Knife! Knife!" She yelled the words but they could not be heard through the thunderous rush of water.

Abruptly she turned and galloped along the path she had traveled. There was no way she could have what other people had. Too many deaths ago she was committed. *Remember who you are.* For a little while she had forgotten.

She was Benedickta Roland. It had to be. She rode into the village and got through to Mexico City by phone, wiring Madame in Venice to secure *Norma.*

She met Jeff at the site during his noon break.

"I thought you weren't coming."

"I rode to the waterfall." She looped the reins over a post he had driven in for her and took the hamper to a knoll in the forest that had become their spot. She set everything out, glad to be busy.

"I see Emma packed a couple of bottles of Superior."

"Yes."

"That's great. I'm parched." He settled back, drinking from the bottle. Even with her face partially averted, she noticed his sleeves were rolled back, saw his tanned forearms, the short reddish hairs that glistened in the sun. He was so confident of her, of his life with her. She felt sick, but she saw further than he did. It was up to her to make the break irrevocable, that much she could do for him.

"Jeff." She took the knife in her hand. "I've been in contact with Madame." Shifting her grip more securely, she struck deep and clean. "She has a contract for me to appear as Norma at La Fenice."

"That's wonderful. When?"

"Right away."

"Well . . . I suppose . . ."

"Yes, and other houses are interested. It will be a full season. *Norma* is a dream for me. I can't let it go, Jeff."

"Of course, I see that."

"I don't think you do, Jeff. My life is in Europe right now, that's where it's opening for me. I don't belong here, Jeff."

"But in a few months I can finish up, I'll join you."

"And do what? Teach? You don't have the language. Jeff, I've had time to think. Jeff, I'm leaving you. And I'm not coming back.

I made a mistake. I didn't know I would hurt you or myself. I believed in our marriage, but I wasn't thinking clearly. Harry's death put me off balance. I needed someone. My mistake was in thinking it was a forever need. It wasn't."

"Wait a minute! Hold on! All this because you've received an offer of a part?"

"Not a part. Norma."

"All right, Norma. I knew I was marrying a singer, probably a great singer. I thought we'd agreed to work it out. You'd be gone part of the time, but . . ."

"It wasn't realistic, Jeff. When I'm doing a role I'm not doing it part of the time. I go to bed with it, I wake up with it. And when it's over I start work on the next. It's a career, Jeff, it takes all of me. And the thing is"—his eyes were not one color but many—"I realize that's the way I want it."

"I don't believe it. You've been at loose ends here, but it will soon be over, and back in the States you can pick up your career."

"I have no credentials there, no reviews, no 'in.' I have to go where they want me. No one else is going to offer me Norma."

"And that's more important than . . ." He fumbled for a word, not wanting to say things like love, or what we feel for each other, settling finally on "Is it more to you than our marriage?"

"It *is* me, Jeff. I'm sorry to be this person, and at the same time I glory in it."

"Yes," he said slowly, "I can see you do."

She got to her feet. "Well, I'll scoop up Emma and get someone to drive us into Mexico City."

"Is this really happening?"

"When I have a chance I'll have a lawyer contact you. I don't want anything. Just to make a clean break, a divorce does that."

"Benedickta, have I done anything? Was it last night? No one meant to laugh."

She shook her head impatiently. "It has nothing to do with last night."

"Is there something I could do then—to make you change your mind, like leave here with you now, today?"

Knife! Knife! "Look after Guapa for me." She smiled that radiant smile every music lover in Venice knew, and threw herself over the horse. She sat well, the horse stepped proudly, and she did not look back. Once out of sight she dug in her heels. The uncleared forest

whipped to a blur. She realized she was thinking in Italian, actually repeating Elvira's phrases. She had been desolate three nights a week before an audience of a thousand people. She grieved in F minor, cried at top C. Her life was a parody of her art, a parody that brought a confused, hurt look into his eyes. "Have I done anything?" Yes, yes—you loved me. That was your crime. And mine was being a fool, forgetting who I am. I'll never forget again, never.

When she arrived at the *casa* she was calm. "Emma, we're leaving for Mexico City this afternoon. Will you help me pack?"

"Who's going? You and Jeff?"

"You and me."

"You have some shopping to do?"

"A role to play. I am flying to Venice to do Norma."

"But . . . how can you?"

"I get on an airplane, it's simple. Do you want to come with me or go back to New York?"

"But Jeff, does he know?"

"I just told him."

"Oh, it's all right then."

"Not exactly. I'm leaving him."

"Leaving him? You can't mean that."

She confronted her friend with anger and accusation. "Emma, why didn't you remind me?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Harry would have. Harry knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I'm Benedickta Roland."

"You're Mrs. Jeff Hartley, and you have a wonderful husband who adores you. Don't do this, Benedickta."

"You wouldn't do it, would you, Emma?"

"No, I most certainly would not."

"Well, that's what makes you Emma, isn't it?"

"Can't you . . . isn't it possible to play the role and come back?"

"Of course it's possible."

"But you're not going to do it?"

"That's right, I'm not."

"You're wrong, Benedickta. You're wrong to leave Jeff. It's irresponsible and selfish."

"Don't lecture me, Emma. Just pack." She went outside with a sugar lump which she set on the palm of her hand, flattening it so

that Guapa could nuzzle it up with her soft lips. Benedickta laid her head along the bony face. "I didn't say good-bye to him, Guapa."

Emma appeared on the patio with two suitcases.

The scenic trip over high plateau country that took them into Mexico City was accomplished with scarcely a word. Once Emma said, "It seems to me you showed more consideration for the horse than for Jeff."

"No more, Emma."

They circled a *glorieta* and approached the airport. "I suppose"—Benedickta broke the silence—"you'll want to go to New York?"

"No," Emma said. "A crazy girl like you needs someone to look after her."

Teatro la Fenice rescheduled their production of *Norma.* Benedickta went into rehearsal immediately. Madame procured her one of Europe's most renowed vocal teachers, a woman and a Spaniard, Margarita da Costa y Portola. A newspaper cartoon depicted Benedickta as a princess guarded by three dragons. They divided her, as Benedickta complained, like a pie. Body—Madame. Soul—Emma. Voice—Margarita.

*Norma* opened to an expectant Venice. If Elvira had been a perilous role, Norma was an impossible one. It required the endurance of a long-distance runner and the virtuosity of a lyric *bel canto,* climaxed with the emotional demands of ultimate renunciation. It was an obstacle course few singers attempted.

Venice came to hear, to judge. Backstage Benedickta whispered to Madame, "Tonight I rip them up!" And she did, with complete abandon. When she sang "I must forget I am a mother," the audience felt that five-month child and the small casket buried in Arcegno. They knew she would be incapable of *eccesso* . . . the murderous excess she contemplated. They experienced her grief, felt the contradictory pulls, perceived with uneasy foreboding the manner in which she would resolve them.

*Norma* brought her the success she had been working for. There were standing ovations, flowers thrown on the stage. Reporters followed her in the street, and offers came from other houses. Verona wanted *Norma* and *I Puritani,* Rome Opera invited her to come and make up her own program. The Palacio de las Bellas Artes in Mexico City sent a contract for the following year. She accepted everything.

Emma made no comment on the Mexico City engagement. Jeff was a subject mutually avoided. But of course Emma, who brought in the mail, knew she subscribed to *Plant Disease Reporter* and *Review of Applied Mycology*, where articles by Jeff appeared. She always locked herself in her room to read these. One paper refuted a statement by a colleague that, cleared of its giant forest, a rich farmland would emerge in the Amazon basin of Brazil. "The incessant rain would convert the fertile topsoil into a texture resembling cement." She laughed, hugging the periodical to her. That sounded like Jeff.

As was usual with her, when one role was under way she began learning another. Here, Madame was her guide. *Turandot*, Puccini's last opera, was completed from notes after his death. A fairy tale, a fantasy, it was presented to her by Madame as a change from both her other roles. "Turandot is the ice-cold princess who rules Peking. In a bitter aria the princess explains that her hatred of men arises from identification with an ancestress. The lovely Lo-u-ling was captured, raped and killed. Turandot's method of keeping at bay the applicants for her hand and kingdom is the asking of three riddles. All who fail in their answers are put to death."

Benedickta was intrigued by the make-believe, and Margarita went to the piano. Benedickta began to sing it through with Madame listening intently and turning pages. "You hear that?" she cried. "The tenor enters here, shattering the mood of feminine mystique. His cry 'No, no!' has the effect of a rock hurled through a window."

"Yes, it is effective." Benedickta had not yet made up her mind about the role. It offered a change of pace, and the aristocratic princess was well suited to her—also, she thought, the heart of ice. It was a decision that could have great bearing on her career. "Let's go over the first aria again. It has a good deal of power." She sang, "*In questa Reggia, or son mill'anni e mille . . .*" Within this Palace thousands of years ago . . . Yes, it was superb theater. "*E quel grido, traverso stirpe . . .*" Cry of anguish that is heard down the ages . . . "*Principessa Lo-u-ling . . . quel grido e quella morte*!" That cry, and that death.

They broke for lunch, Emma serving her version of gazpacho.

"*Turandot* was first performed at La Scala in 1926 with Rosa Raisa in the title role." Madame was pushing, anxious for her to do it.

Benedickta temporized. "So what are the three questions she asks?"

"What is the phantom born each night, to die in the morning?"

"I don't know. I should have to be put to death."

Madame smiled. "Hope."

"And the second?"

"What is like a fever, grows cold when you die and surges up when you contemplate great deeds? —Blood."

"And the third?"

"What is the ice that sets you on fire?"

"Is the answer Turandot?"

Madame laughed. "You guessed, just as Calaf, our young prince in disguise, does."

Benedickta got up and walked to the window. "Shall I do it?" she asked Margarita.

The Spaniard hesitated. "It is a grueling role."

"That is the only kind Madame picks for me."

Cara was let out of her cage so she could enjoy the crumbs. It was the time of day when Benedickta relaxed. Margarita, a student of operatic history, claimed the only way to live within it and keep one's sanity was to be able to laugh at it. "In the old days all the great houses were lit by elaborate chandeliers with hundreds of candles. If the performance went on too long, hot wax began to drop on the bare shoulders and exposed charms of the ladies."

"It probably woke them up," Benedickta said, and then giggled. "Wasn't the décolletage very low in those days?"

"Very."

"How marvelous!"

"Queen Victoria and Albert were opera lovers. They used to attend regularly at Covent Garden. Being royalty, they generally arrived late, and"—Margarita shrugged—"you know the British, no matter where they were in the performance, the orchestra broke off to play 'God Save the Queen.' "

Benedickta was appalled. When the joke was on the audience that was one thing, but to maim a work of art made her shudder. "I thought you said they were opera lovers!"

Best of all she liked to hear the stories of the time even earlier when opera was a patron art, reserved for the courts of Europe. "It was only for the peerage, and they went as much for the sake of the

stage effects as for the singing. There were enormous machines to produce special effects. Hell was accomplished by men crouched under the stage, who threw resin into the torches. These, of course, were the early footlights. They flared up, exploded and sent out a noxious odor. But for the most part they relied on machines brought into the wings as close to the stage as possible, and the best seats in the house were considered those on the extreme side, so you could watch them being readied, worked and wheeled away. The most famous was the cloud machine. It floated as many as three clouds across the stage in several positions. Its greatest feat was to lower a cloud with a goddess reclining in it, who arose and sang."

"If she wasn't bumped down too hard," Benedickta said.

"Then of course, there were the castrati. They were idolized for their unearthly voices, with ranges no normal man or woman ever attained. They became so puffed up that one of them always sang a song of his choosing before starting his part in the opera. Another had it written into his contract that he make every entrance upon the back of a white horse."

Benedickta had become very pale. She did not laugh with Madame and Marguarita. Emma, who always watched her closely on days she performed, suggested she lie down before leaving for the theater.

Benedickta was riding a crest. *Turandot* in its turn was acclaimed by critics and public. Benedickta belonged to La Fenice. They had discovered her. She felt she was on home turf. She was signed to appear next in Verona, where she repeated her success. Then Rome. Rome she was afraid to face, wondering what memories it would impose. She checked into the Hotel Quirinale to discover Wolf had left no permanent scar. She hired a car one day and set out for Arcegno. Halfway there she told the driver abruptly that she had changed her mind.

The press in Rome differed over the Roland voice. She played a wider repertoire, adding *Il Trovatore*, *Aïda* and *Macbeth*. They agreed her sound dazzled, but complained of unevenness in the high register, while her middle range at times had a covered quality. Yet the scope was unheard of, no demarcations existed for her. She sang contralto as easily as soprano, with the ability of a great cantatrice, G to top E.

The voice fit no category and there was none that compared to it.

But there were bound to be flaws along this far-flung perimeter. *Il Giorno* said of her, "Roland conquers as much by her faults as her virtues."

Benedickta was in despair over the criticism, which she felt was justified. She begged Margarita to help her. "I want every note perfect. I want to move from register to register smoothly. I want to be a great singer. Can you make me a great singer?"

"In the first place," Margarita said sensibly, "singing is subjective." The woman was afflicted with a squint which made her gaze appear malevolent. But she was devoted to Benedickta and believed in her as an artist of the first rank. "People hear you and feel things about you. They aren't necessarily true. You are fortunate, Benedickta, that the press takes so much interest. You must learn to do the best you can and pay no attention to the notices."

"But I want to be perfect!"

"Perfect? I prefer the compassion, power and agility you bring to your work."

"But if I try to be perfect, perhaps I will sing better."

"Ah, better? Better I understand. Let me hear you move from pianissimo to forte. Again. Swell the final note—now diminish, but hold—"

"Was it beautiful?" she asked into the quiet that followed.

"Did you think it beautiful?"

"Yes!"

"So did I."

"Oh, Margarita, you don't understand. It isn't that I want to be the best, I have to be. I do, I *have* to be."

Margarita with her squint eye saw into the turbulence that produced art. She was sorry for the great ones.

Not only did Benedickta accept the Mexico City engagement, but appearances were scheduled for the Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, as well. She worked through the spring and summer, stretching her repertoire to include Tosca, La Gioconda and Lucia di Lammermoor. One by one the roles fell to her technique and capacity for hard work. She was known throughout Italy and was about to carry her talent to South America. The great house La Scala had so far ignored her, as did the Metropolitan in her own country. The Chicago Lyric was also silent. There was no bid from Covent Garden or

Paris Opera. But she had just turned thirty, those bastions would fall. And in the meantime she would go where she was wanted.

She flew to Mexico City with the unholy three and her canary. She was greeted courteously, but with a wait-and-see attitude by the media. The three formidable females with whom she traveled were given some mention. Even Cara had her photograph taken.

When she closed herself into her suite at the Hotel L'Escargot in the Colonia Napoli, Benedickta's first move was toward the telephone. The bags lay unopened on the bed. She could find no listing for an agronomy station in Valle de Bravo. She looked up the Ministry of Agriculture and inquired for Professor Jeff Hartley. They transferred her call.

"Señor Hartley, the *norteamericano* professor?"

"Yes."

"He is no longer in the country. His government has sent him to India."

"India?"

She hung up slowly, for some reason remembering Madame pointing with scorn to actors on television who build up their parts by looking at the receiver before replacing it. "No one," Madame declared, "ever looks at a telephone."

She's right, Benedickta thought. But where do you look? At objects that don't register? At gardens and sky, window-framed, bright with sun while you stand in the cold of a room, shut away? She had not discussed Mexico with Emma once it had been confirmed. She had not admitted to herself how much she wanted to see Jeff. She wondered now if that was her whole reason for seizing on this Latin American junket.

It was crazy to want to open everything again. It had always been impossible. It was a good thing he was in India.

Benedickta stuffed a fist against her mouth in case some sound escaped her. But the storm did not last. She became quiet, listening inside herself. She had postponed her life. But no more. She would open in *Turandot,* sing *Aïda,* give them *Norma,* but Benedickta would be among the roles she played. She had no clear idea what she meant by this decision. But she had taken it.

After a session with Margarita the following morning she suggested they set out to see the sights. Mexico City presented great contrasts. But a sense of beauty and proportion endowed every

dwelling from the humblest lean-to to the great public plazas. She was delighted to be led by Margarita to the Department of Water and Power, where, down a shaft among gear boxes and pipes, was a fresco by Covarrubias. Outside the building a water god had been laid out in tile in a large rectangular pool. Benedickta wondered at her teacher's erudition. "How do you know where to find a Covarrubias outside the museum?"

Margarita squinted at her. "I read the guidebooks."

Margarita exclaimed at the flowers, gardens, parks and fountains, all of which reminded her of home. For Benedickta these appeals to the eye were counterbalanced by dirt, disease and ragged children, especially those lugging gunnysacks of firewood attached to bands across their foreheads. The hunchbacked, the lame, the blind, those with withered limbs, with the tracery of pox on their faces, were prominent in the population. Outside the theater, a man sold souvenirs who had no face, just nostrils and a kind of structure fashioned out of skin and cartilage from which a tube emerged. There was nothing below it.

Turning the corner, they were engulfed by a festive crowd. "What do you suppose it is?" Benedickta asked.

"Who knows? A saint's day, a martyr of the revolution. We Latins always find excuse for fireworks and parades, and here is also the mariachi band."

Benedickta nodded grimly. These were a terrible trial to her. She had been in the country only two days but she knew she would never come across a band that was simultaneously together and on key. The parade whirled by, colorful garlands, flashing skirts, guitars. A horse passed with a jaunty straw hat perched on its head to which ribbons had been attached. The splayed beast could hardly totter, he was ready for the dog-food cans, and yet was being pulled on by merry-faced revelers.

Benedickta carried too many impressions back to her hotel room. But the focus for her was the beribboned horse. This blindness for suffering Benedickta took into her heart for the princess Turandot. All was pageantry around the princess. The cruelty was not cruel . . . it went unseen. Only the straw hat and ribbons were noticed.

Benedickta brought great authority to the role. The ice maiden . . . sweeping upward in a tempestuous crescendo, "No, no! They will not have me!" to the menace of "Stranger, do not challenge your

fortune!" In "The riddles are three, there is one death," Benedickta surmounted a thrilling top C.

With the last act both the tone and quality of her voice changed. There was warmth where before there had been coldness. "Del primo pianto—ah!" . . . *I have never wept before*! And "Il suo nome è Amor!" *His name* . . . ? for the young Calaf has turned the tables, setting *her* a riddle. And when he takes her boldly with his kisses, she has the answer . . . *Love*!

It was her debut performance and there was no sleep for her after the show. She and her three dragons were joined in a small café by the conductor. They compared other vigils. Benedickta recalled sitting up with Wolf. Their paths had not crossed since the divorce. But she remembered that a note from her stepdaughter, Nicole, lay on her dressing table, asking in rounded penmanship if she could come live with her. She let Emma deal with the child.

Geno Tufano was extremely attentive. "I fall in love with every good singer I conduct, even when they are fat and ugly, but when such a one as you walks into the opera house, I am distraught."

Benedickta laughed at him, but she was pleased. "I was a bit distraught with you. Act Two, the duetto, you pulled me along with your baton. I don't like taking it at that tempo."

Emma sighed. Benedickta fought with everyone, especially attractive men.

The morning papers were brought to their table by the faceless one. Everyone knew him, he was supposed to bring good luck on the theory that his own luck was so bad, a balance must be struck. And this morning it was. The reviews were favorable. She was considered a *soprano d'agilito* of remarkable histrionic ability. "Roland's voice is somewhat erratic. However, at her best, no voice has been heard in this capital that compares with it."

Madame and the rest looked up, smiling. Only Benedickta did not smile. At La Scala the reigning diva was called La Divina. While of her they said . . . "at her best." She shredded the review and threw it, so much confetti, over the table.

The next production at El Palacio was *Aïda*. She never came to it without a residual ache of Larchmont sifting in.

During the first aria, "Ritorna vincitor!" she was conscious of sacrificing a smooth tonal line for dramatic effect. *"Ah! non fu in terra mai da più crudeli angoscie un core affranto!"* She left the

stage and stared at her darkened face in the dressing room mirror, preparing herself for Act II. In the duet with Amneris, Benedickta laid her boldly colored notes against the sweet, insinuating tone. . . . She muted the storm, held back the sorrow, and slipped into the legato with which Margarita had taught her to underline a thought.

"But you, King, you, lord, with your great power, spare these lives." She was allowing herself to drift . . . Laverne and her father entering the living room . . . something jolted her. The male singer playing Ramphis indulged in note holding. He held and held, throwing off the tempo, infuriating the conductor. Benedickta waited for her chance, which came in the triumphal scene with full chorus, full orchestra and six principals all singing out. Quick as a tiger on an elephant's back she jumped an octave to sustain an E flat in alt through the orchestral postlude. The conductor was even more furious.

Act III started well. The exquisite phrasing of the prayer mesmerized the audience. Ramphis, however, sulked and refused to sing his minor lines, saving his voice for the more florid passages. And Benedickta found herself in trouble in "Oh, patria mia." She could grab an E flat out of the air, but to build to top C through a long phrase gave her trouble. This same spot had concerned Margarita in rehearsal. Benedickta found it hard to lament for five minutes on the green hills of home. No place was home to her. She had never had a home. But she gathered fresh resolution for the outburst *"Un giorno solo di sì dolce incanto. . . ."*

Now nothing could stop the sweep of her performance. Her cry of *"Orrore!"* brought the audience straining forward in their seats. And the A flat and G of *"Ah! Pieta!"* reinforced their devotion.

But what of the critics, who went home and wrote and analyzed and were ready to kill you for a clever line? How would they judge her this time?

Past exhaustion she applied cold cream, mixed the tawny base with green eye shadow, the red of her lips and the lavender shadings below the cheekbones, running it all into a crazy mask. She delighted in making herself inhuman. "I shall be worthy!" she mouthed one of the final phrases. Worthy of what? Of whom? Once she had known.

She waited up and the three women waited with her. She was too close to her performance. There was no perspective, it blended with a dozen rehearsals.

Madame and Margarita, obeying the superstitions of the theater, talked of other things.

Again the papers were well disposed, but not unreservedly so. One reviewer criticized her unheralded E flat. "Roland's acrobatics in Act II cost her an awkward passage later. One fears for the instrument if she continues so unrestrained." The other paper believed a miracle had been created onstage.

"So what does it add up to?" she asked Madame.

"A career."

Knowing Benedickta's heart, Emma said, "You are the greatest singer of all time."

Benedickta turned to her vocal coach. "And what do you say, Margarita?"

"The voice is a wonder, but more work is required. The work never stops."

Benedickta studied the three. Madame's eyes had been redone. Young eyes in a preserved face were disconcerting. Like Margarita's squint, it seemed to give her power to see both forward and back. Benedickta considered their lives. Madame plastered the walls of her hotel rooms with Thomas Rowlandson's remarkable pornographic aquatints. Emma, close to fifty, had been born an old maid. She was without desire, desire had been sublimated into a wish to be useful, to serve. Emma sprang to life only when she was needed. And the more newly acquired Margarita? Haughty and reservedly Spanish, her age unguessable. Passion still flashed in her strange eyes. Madame whispered that she paid young men with whom she sat in the cafés.

And what of herself, Benedickta Roland? To Emma she was family. But the devotion of the other two was not to herself. She recognized this and was proud of it. They followed her star. Their commitment was to music. When her voice failed, they would be gone. It was understood.

A new production of *Norma* followed. Norma! Not even there was she able to break through into the small charmed circle of the world's great artists. Partly it was bad luck. She was fighting a case of catarrh. She humidified her room, took steam into her lungs, and in desperation went into the bathroom, turned on the tap water full force and screamed. By curtain time she had raised her voice to a level sufficient for the role. But the agility was not there, it seemed to her thick and unresponsive.

Benedickta's vocal difficulties that night brought a new element

to her Norma; the cavatina was more sculptured than sung. And this refinement she kept. But the effort of the evening was survival. Once again the conductor was pulling her along. The ensemble was ragged, and—ultimate catastrophe—one of the singers left out an entire phrase. Sudden fury shook her, additional adrenaline charged her voice. Exultation flooded to the domed ceiling. "*Solo! Tutti,*" flaring with power, "*I Romani, a cento a cento fian mietuti, fian distrutti!*"—"Romans by the hundreds will be cut down, destroyed!" It was fearsome, it was wonderful. It was walking past the cow bitch and her father and their whole brood in the cemetery.

She did not wait up for reviews, but went to bed. Three more performances in Mexico City and the entourage moved to Buenos Aires. It was while she was performing there that the unexpected happened. Madame brought a telegram. "From La Scala," she whispered, as one would say, "the Holy Ghost."

Benedickta tore it open, scanned the few lines and waved it over her head like a banner. "Emma! Margarita!" Her dragons gathered. "This is it! La Scala! who have ignored me, been silent, never acknowledged that I was alive and well as a singer, now want a favor. They ask me to do them the courtesy of filling in for Bertini in *Norma. Norma*! Imagine it! Norma is mine. Of everything I sing, it is most mine. I am to sing it at La Scala!"

"I wouldn't do it," Madame said.

"What?"

"It is only to fill in. It's an insult to ask you to do that."

"The insult was to cast another singer to begin with. Of course I will do it. And from now on I will *open* La Scala. It will be Benedickta Roland on December seventh, the feast day of St. Ambrose, patron saint of Milano!" It was tradition that the artist chosen for that premiering date was the prima donna assoluta of La Scala, and therefore the world.

"But at the moment," Madame reminded her, "you will be filling in."

"I forbid you to speak slightingly of this engagement. I remind you once more, it is *La Scala.* It doesn't matter what the conditions are. What matters is that I sing where only the greatest sing. This is the most important day of my life! And one more thing, Madame, we will start work on *Madama Butterfly.*"

"*Butterfly?*"

Benedickta enjoyed turning the tables. It was the first time she had decided on a role. Majestically she continued, "First performed disastrously, at La Scala, 1904. In 1907 Geraldine Farrar and Enrico Caruso played the major roles. Puccini had revised it and this time it was a smash hit."

Madame crossed herself. She did not like anything that had not been a success from the beginning.

"You don't say a word," Benedickta challenged her.

"Because you will not listen."

"I will listen to myself."

"There's also a letter from Nicole," Emma ventured.

"I'll read it later. Did you remember to get her a birthday present?"

"Yes, of course."

"What did you get her?"

"A doll."

"A doll? Emma, she's fourteen. Next time get her something sensible, get her a book." She did not know her stepdaughter. She had not liked either of the parents, and her antipathy was transferred. But the parallel with her own life imposed a duty. Nicole was sent to the best schools. Emma corresponded with the girl regularly, bought her treats and mailed pin money. She made the journey whenever they were in Italy, to visit the Swiss school, each time returning with glowing accounts of the child. Benedickta usually cut her off. Pretty, bright? What did it matter? To listen to such reports was not part of her obligation. She stuffed the letter into her purse and forgot it. Emma's heart ached for both of them. Each so much needed a family.

Within ten days they made the return trip to Italy, Cara in Benedickta's lap with a hood over her. They flew into Rome, planning to drive to Milan the following day. At the Rome hotel, when Benedickta lifted the hood, she discovered Cara was dead. "It can't be! Emma, Emma, give her some water."

Emma examined the small stiffened figure and shook her head.

Benedickta withdrew to her room and hadn't a word to say to anyone. She had kept the hood on too long. It had been the heat. In her hurry to arrive, one more heart had stopped beating. She did not come out to eat and only appeared the following morning when Emma rapped on the door to say the car was there. When

she came from her room the first thing she saw was a canary in a cage.

"No!" she said hoarsely. "Leave it!"

"But Margarita thought . . ."

"I said, leave it!"

Benedickta stood on the floor boards of La Scala and stared up at the rising tiers. Six, seven? And the arched rococo ceiling. But only for a moment. The cry for places, *"Tutti!"* and work began. There was time for only the briefest run-through. She opened immediately.

The Milanese were stunned, they cheered the vocal home runs, they cried *"Bis!"* They yelled *"Brava!"* They wept. When she appeared for her curtain call they would not let her go. The rhythmic clapping kept her standing forty minutes. "La Regina!" "Diva!" Those with opera glasses trained on her discerned tears, the rest saw only the smile.

When she retired to her dressing room Madame handed her a card. "Mr. Earl Be Ane wishes to pay his respects and add his bravas."

Earl Be Ane was a famed patron of opera.

"Ask Mr. Be Ane to come in."

The small, distinguished man bent over her hand, "Brava, Prima Donna Assoluta. Queen of La Scala."

"Thank you, Mr. Be Ane. It *did* go well tonight." She almost added, because it had to. She bit her lip.

Mr. Be Ane was too urbane to take notice of this sign of strain. "A small party this evening, in your honor. Please don't deny an old man."

"I generally . . ."

"You have never opened before at La Scala, Madame Roland, how can there be a 'generally'?"

"You're right. I'd love to come."

"I'll send my car in twenty minutes."

She was escorted from a side door by Mr. Be Ane's chauffeur. But the crowd recognized and surged around her. They ran after the limousine, there was a cavalcade of cars blowing horns. She was hurried into a hotel where her host had reserved the main ballroom. "You are here, thank God, in one piece, Divina."

"I think everyone has gone insane."

"It is you who have placed them under enchantment with your art. It is very great. Norma is yours. I have heard many Normas, but I have not heard it at all until tonight. Everyone is waiting to meet you. But there is one in particular, my close friend Wendel Simeon."

"The, the . . ." She hesitated over "movie mogul," it seemed a bit crude.

"Exactly. The producer. He's doing a film in Italy."

"The papers say he's the richest man in the world."

Her host laughed. "The papers say a great many things, but he brought a considerable fortune to the movie business. It has enabled him to do experimental and very beautiful pictures. It is the reason he has risen so fast. Like a meteor."

"And he's not young."

"No, but this is a second career for him."

"He invented something or other, didn't he?"

"That's right. And he married well."

"Is he married now?"

"I really don't know. He's changed spouses rather frequently. But you will see, there is only one Simeon. There he is with the Baron Courtney."

"I don't know the baron."

"All that will be remedied." He took her hand and led her across a terrazzo floor. She might have been onstage. There was a noticeable hush with guests moving to make room for them.

. . . I'm playing in an opera that isn't written yet—my own. Nothing was real, not the elegance of veined marble columns, or perfumes wafted by cigarette smoke. She was so open to impressions that she saw everything, even a wart covered with makeup base, and a new type of glasses frame . . . and my God, she had sung La Scala! She had arrived, although she didn't know where she was at this precise moment. She was where the car stopped and the party began. In the ballroom of some sumptuous hotel. It was Act I, she

knew that. The opening of her life as a diva, a great star and a great lady.

Two gentlemen came forward. "Madame Roland, may I present Mr. Simeon and Baron Courtney?"

The baron was a strikingly handsome man, Simeon strikingly ugly. He seemed large and burly to her, with a nose that overshadowed his lip. His only good features were his eyes, they held hers and they were beautiful, of an amazing blue, they looked at her with an intimacy which disregarded the throng in the room. His manner, as he linked her arm through his, was as natural as though they were old friends.

"But you can't take her away," Be Ane called after them.

He already had. "You don't want a party tonight. You must be exhausted." He was right and he was wrong. Over the exhaustion, pressing it down so she hardly felt it, was exhilaration.

A gilt openwork elevator lifted them a floor. "I have arranged a quiet supper. Earl will forgive us. So will Philip. And I will sit across from you like a worshipful schoolboy. You will not have to fend off even a token hand kiss. My total desire is to give you the best dinner you ever had, open a bottle of a fine vintage, and then see you to your hotel. Is that agreeable to you?"

Benedickta nodded. This was the way Act I opened. . . .

"Oh, and the name is Wendel."

She came out of her dream to ask, "Are you really the richest man in the world? The newspapers say you are."

He laughed. "It fluctuates from hour to hour. Some hours I suppose I am."

"I hope this is one of them. I would like to have dinner with the richest man in the world."

"I'll call my broker if you like and get a few quotations."

"Yes, do that."

"Really?"

"Yes. If you're only the second-richest man, I'm going back to the party."

Wendel Simeon complained, "I've seen more opera these last few weeks than in my entire life. I've even bought stock in La Scala."

"So now I'm working for you?"

"Hardly." They were driving through the countryside. Simeon explained that he enjoyed the feeling of movement. "Cars, planes,

boats. Do you know that in the United States planes fly west at even thousand altitudes, and east at odd thousand altitudes?" He opened the bar in their section of the limousine and poured a white wine. "Will you?"

"Not during the day."

"How many rules you have for yourself."

"I am a singer."

"I am beginning to think that is the same as being a nun in a cloister."

"Compared to the life you lead, I suppose it is."

"What kind of life do you imagine I lead?"

"The papers say you escorted a young lady gowned in a trash bag to a party at Le Club in New York last Wednesday."

"I did. You see, it was a throwaway party, everything was disposable."

"Including the young lady?"

"Especially the young lady. She wanted to be in my next picture. That's what they all want."

"I think you do yourself an unjustice, many of them must like you for yourself. You are, after all, a remarkable man."

Impulsively he pressed her hands. And as always when he touched her she forgot he was ugly and could only stare into those blue, deeply fringed eyes.

"I've lived the life of a young man." He spoke earnestly in an effort to have her see him as he saw himself. "I am sixty-two years old, but I live as a young man, and shall, until I crumple up and blow away."

"And that's the most important thing I could know about you? When people speak of Simeon, it's always in terms of your genius."

He shook his head, impatient that she did not understand. "Not genius. Statements. Statements that I must make. It's only by the statements of a few men that civilization grows. Not that I think of myself as one of those—a giant. But I'm not an animal cropping either, content to lay my bones down in some pasture. My job is to keep it all spinning. So I create my own youth, as you have created your voice."

"Excuse me, sir." The annunciator had been activated. "Your call to Mr. Hampton in New York has been put through."

Simeon reached for the phone. "Have you thought over my proposition, S.H.?" He listened and laughed. "That reminds me of an

old Lebanese joke. A grandfather is asking his five-year-old grandson, 'How much is two and two?' The five-year-old asks, 'Are you buying or selling?' . . . Your quote seems in line. I think we've got our financing. I already have Stander working on the scenario."

Benedickta was thoughtful throughout this conversation. "You're a very powerful man."

"I apologize for the interruption, but this was a matter I've been trying to settle."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps you are trying to impress me."

"I wouldn't be the first, would I?"

She was not deflected. "Did you know that in the developed countries riboflavin, niacin, thiamine, Vitamin D, iron, calcium and phosphorus are added to cereal products?"

Simeon stared at her as if she had delivered an incantation. "What?"

"And the government in India should really be made to fortify atla. That's a mash of wheat used in making chapati. And chapati is the main staple of the north Indian diet."

"You astound me."

"Then we astound each other."

"How do you happen to have such wide-flung interests?"

"Is it so unusual to want to stop hunger? Most food containers are ripped, punctured or torn in transit. This means bugs eating the food, and a pregnant beetle can multiply a million and a half times in six months."

"A million and a half times . . . ?" He looked a bit dazed.

"Don't you see, a movie with these problems, there is a statement! And now you can drop me back at the hotel. I have a scene to run through."

Simeon could not make the required mental adjustment. "But can't we talk about the north Indian diet, and . . . and pregnant beetles?"

"Not today. I am too busy."

"But you can't just throw out these ideas and leave me with them!"

"Why not? You are the genius. You will know what to do with them. I don't know." As she stepped from the car, a *paparazzo* snapped a picture of them. "Ah," Benedickta cried, "that means by the next edition I will be your mistress."

He bent over her hand. "Would that it were true."

Madame had been watching from an upstairs window. "Did you know, that man dyes his eyebrows?"

Benedickta whirled past her without a word.

The coaching session, however, did not go well. Benedickta was distracted. "What is that dreadful noise?"

Emma spoke up quickly. "It's Nicole, I told her she could use the blender."

"Nicole! What is she doing here?"

"It's Easter vacation. You invited her, remember?"

"No, I don't remember. And I can't have someone around making noise with the blender. Send her right back."

Emma was shocked. "We can't do that. The girl has been looking forward to the visit all semester. I'll tell her she must be quiet."

Benedickta tapped her fingers impatiently against the score. "Just how long does this vacation go on?"

"Ten days. But I'll see to her. She won't be any trouble."

"All right, all right. Can we please proceed?"

Later that afternoon a parcel arrived. Under mounds of tissue lay a gown and matching turban. Benedickta glanced at the enclosed note: "It would give me great pleasure to see you in this tonight. . . . Wen." Simeon was taking too much on himself. She kicked the box out of her way as she passed it. Weren't her clothes good enough to suit him? Did he think she lacked taste? So they were off the rack and not originals, too bad. She would wear a nightgown before she wore that thing with its turban.

A small scratching sound at the door irritated her further. Why didn't whoever it was knock? She supposed it was Emma, come to help her dress. "Well?" she called.

The door opened and a young girl stood at the threshold. Benedickta stared at her in the mirror and then turned. "Nicole?"

"Yes, Madame Roland."

"But so . . . grown up. How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"How have you been, Nicole? How are you getting on with your studies?"

"Very well, Madame Roland."

"Well, that's nice. Now, as you can see, I am preparing to go out . . ."

"Oh, this will only take a minute, Madame Roland."

"What will?"

The girl came into the room, clutching a large glossy promotional photograph of Benedickta. "Would you sign it, please?"

"Of course."

"Would you say . . . 'For my dearest Nicole, with all my love, Benedickta.' "

"Are you sure you want something that flowery?"

"Yes, please. I want it for my room at school. None of the girls will believe you are my guardian."

"I see. Well, then, how does it go . . . 'My dearest Nicole'?" She began to write.

"Oh, madame, I'm so grateful. I can't tell you what this means to me." Then, to Benedickta's horror, she dropped to the floor, grabbed her around the knees and began to sob.

"Whatever are you doing?" Benedickta tried to pull away, but Nicole held fast.

"Please tell me"—the words were barely distinguishable, half hiccup, half sob—"I know it's true. But I won't tell anyone. I swear I won't. You're my mother, aren't you? I've always known. Mother! Mother! Please love me, please, Mother, please, please love me! Please, Mother."

Benedickta pulled and shook her skirt to free herself. "What are you talking about? You know very well you are the daughter of Anna Maria Bianda. I never laid eyes on you until you were eight years old."

"I know that's what everyone says. But it isn't true, you gave me to her to raise because I was a bastard. I know you're my mother, I know it. My best subject is music! So, you see, I know!"

Benedickta picked up the photograph she had just inscribed and tore it to shreds. The action shocked Nicole out of her tears. Benedickta said in a strictly measured tone, "You are no relation to me. I educated you because your mother died under my roof. I hope that is plain enough for you. You must get these silly adolescent ideas out of your head. I suppose you spread it around school that you are my illegitimate child?"

Nicole hid her face; tears continued trickling through her fingers.

"It's too bad in a way that the truth is so tepid. Your story is much more vivid."

"Are you going to send me away?"

"Why should I do that?"

"Because, because . . ."

"Because you are a silly goose? Not at all. In fact, I want to give you a present so you will know there are no hard feelings."

The girl looked up in wonder. "A present?"

"See that gown over there in the box?"

"The coral one with the turban?"

"It's yours!"

"But, Madame Roland, after behaving as I did, I couldn't . . ."

"I want you to have it. Put it on."

"Right now? But Madame Roland . . ."

Benedickta lifted up the coral creation and tossed it over a chair. Then, stepping up to Nicole, she began unfastening the school uniform. The dark navy plaid with its Peter Pan collar fell to the floor and Benedickta hauled the crepe de chine over the girl's head.

"Oh," Nicole exclaimed, "it's like a Cinderella ball dress."

"And the first place you're going to wear it is to the front door. I want you to answer it."

"In this?"

"In this. Hold still, I've got to wind this turban properly."

"Wait until the girls at school see this." She stopped abruptly.

"Remember, it's from your *guardian*."

"Oh, yes, do you forgive me?"

"Of course, the more you deny now, the more they'll believe."

"What shall I do? Do you want me to leave the school?"

"Over a thing like this? It will be good for my image. I only wish you were a bit younger."

When she saw Benedickta was laughing, Nicole laughed too. "Now," Benedickta directed, "try a pair of my shoes. And just in time, there's the bell." She lifted her voice and it pierced through the house. "Let Nicole get the door!" Then, turning to the girl, "Head high, Nicole. Your mother wasn't just a servant. She was the mistress of a very famous man. Remember all the celebrities that used to come to the house? So you got part of it right."

"Tell me who?"

"When you are older. Go answer the door. And look imperious, like an empress."

"Like you in *Turandot*?"

"Exactly. And you may tell Signor Simeon I shall join him directly in the sitting room."

Benedickta herself was a quick-change artist. It took only a few

minutes to comb her hair, add a dash of lipstick and pull a dress off the hanger. She swept into the outer room with a dazzling smile for Simeon. "Did you meet my ward?" she asked.

"A charming girl. Marvelous taste in clothes."

Nothing further was said on the subject. They enjoyed these skirmishes.

He took her to a restaurant adorned with stained-glass windows. There was no one else there. "Where are the customers?" Benedickta asked, looking around.

"We are the customers."

"You mean, you bought out the place for tonight?"

"I reserved it, yes."

"Going out with you is like dating some Mideast potentate. What is your nationality? Are you French?"

"A French father, an Italian mother, a Greek soul, and I am about to order Irish coffee."

"Tell me about yourself. Were you a poor boy who worked his way up the ladder?"

"No, I was an engineer, employed by a large firm. But there were slack periods, and to keep from being bored, I worked out certain ideas. Now if you do that on company time, your ideas belong to the company. So I devised a method of covering my drawing board with tinfoil on which I drew with a sharp stylus. The light reflected off the tinfoil blinded anyone who came into my office so that my marks were invisible to anyone but me. There was only one spot in the room from which they could be seen and that's where I stood."

"And it all started from that?"

"Yes."

"And what was it you invented that made you so rich?"

"When people ask that question I usually respond with some glamorous product. But the truth is I invented the nozzle for spray can tops."

"I can't believe it!" Benedickta laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

"When you consider I receive a royalty on every spray can sold in the known world . . . it adds up."

"And allows you to make statements."

"Exactly."

"There *is* something about your work. You always know it's a

Simeon movie, even when it's bad."

He laughed. "I've never done a bad movie, only a few that haven't quite come off."

"Yes, I think that's true. The cinematography is always haunting and strange. But with your remarkable gifts why should you have a reputation as a playboy, jet-setter? I really am curious. Why isn't your art enough for you?"

"I play hard *because* I work hard. I drive fast, I fly my own plane. Fast. And I pick up information about anything and everything. I pack my films with curiosa. It's part of the mystique. For instance, did you know that the same year Copernicus published *De Revolutionibus,* Cellini created his saltcellar? Or if you don't die in three hundred and one days of wounds inflicted, the state of California will not recognize you were murdered? I've made that interesting little fact the basis of my current film. Oh, yes, and Eric Satie, you would know him, the eccentric French composer, set snails and oysters to music, whereas any sensible man would prefer to eat them."

Benedickta leaned across the table and whispered, "Like you want to eat me?"

"I honestly don't know what I want to do with you, except not let you out of my sight."

"Why?"

"You are unique, that's why. You jump into new personalities as though they were different dresses."

"But you know all about that. It's believing. I believe in everything. There's no possibility I can't believe in—like a child, Wendel, who accepts the kind of world it takes a Chagall or a Simeon a lifetime to return to."

"A lifetime? I need another lifetime for all I still want to say."

She was beginning to learn how sensitive he was about his age. Always the first to bring it up, he writhed under anyone else's allusion, however oblique. "Are you afraid of dying?" Benedickta asked gently.

"Not afraid. I'm determined not to. You haven't tried the carrots Vichy."

"They're delicious."

"Tell me, Benedickta, is it true about the three gargoyles who guard you?"

"Is what true?"

"All Italy says they are constantly at your side to ward off men."

She laughed. "I'm here with you, am I not? No, they are my teacher, my coach and the only family I have."

"What about the tiny one who looks like a figurine out of a clock?"

"Madame. My coach."

"I see. Then I must invite them too."

"Invite them?" She put down her fork. "Where?"

"The picture will soon be done. I thought I'd relax by taking a cruise."

"Oh?" Benedickta was instantly wary.

To reassure her he said, "Has it ever occurred to you that I would like to be the friend of Benedickta Roland?"

"Nothing else?"

"Of course I am desperately in love with you. So is every man in Italy and South America, wherever you have performed. But all I hope is to be your friend. As a friend, I invite you and your three companions to accompany me and my wife—you see how proper this is?—yes, me and my wife, on a cruise of the Mediterranean. We'll visit Mallorca, Ibiza, put in along the Sicilian coast, ending up in Piraeus. And as far as your work goes, you literally needn't miss a beat. The yacht will be your rehearsal hall. Every convenience will be at your disposal, a Steinway, recording devices, a practice room. You would be served dinner in your cabin when you wish. I offer complete privacy, three weeks of it."

"I was on a boat twice before, a steamer each time. I adored it."

"With me sailing is a passion."

"You have so many passions, Wendel. I have only one. Imagine having a yacht as a studio! . . . But of course, I couldn't. Of course not."

"But why?"

"For one thing, it would be very unpleasant for your other guests, listening to warm-ups, repeated bars. It can be quite distressing. Impossible, as a matter of fact."

"But there won't be other guests."

That brought the conversation to an abrupt halt. Benedickta chewed thoughtfully without taking her eyes from him. "You mentioned your wife."

"Yes, but, you see, I don't like my wife. I don't like her at all. She will only be along to make it proper. If she doesn't like your singing, she can go sit in the boiler room."

"I thought it was a sailboat," Benedickta said.

"The engines are auxiliary, just in case. I told you, I'm a sailing buff, and I know that part of the world. There's nothing like the *meltemia* blowing down from the northeast. Those are fine winds to run ahead of. When they are strong, they are called *cambanatos*, which means church-bell ringer."

"Yes."

"What does yes mean?"

"Yes means yes. I'm going with you. Because I too am a *cambanatos*. I too can ring church bells."

"You must be mad," Madame said. "A yacht? Suppose we're all seasick?"

"I have never been seasick in my life. I love the sea."

"And I made the crossing from Barcelona to Mallorca every summer as a girl." Margarita's coloring was high. "There is no rougher body of water in the world. I was thrown from my bunk, but I was never seasick."

"I think it would be thrilling," Emma said.

"Well, it seems none of you have a thimble's worth of sense," Madame grumbled, but she had given in.

Emma packed prudently, sweaters, raincoats, various hoods and hats, as well as summer things.

During this hubbub Simeon was on the set of *Winter Winds*. He always worked on a closed set.

They were to sail from Naples, where *Barka*, the prosaic name for possibly the world's most luxurious yacht, was being provisioned. Captain Marapese respectfully showed them on board, acquainting them with some of the features of what would be their floating home. "She was crafted in Denmark. The floors are pegged, there isn't a nail in her. The wood, pecan and mahogany, all hand-rubbed. Tooled Moroccan leather is used for upholstery throughout. The chandeliers in the main dining room came from an Irish castle."

"More sumptuous than La Scala," Benedickta whispered.

On the forward deck a severely tailored woman acknowledged introductions with a brief nod. It was Mme. Simeon. Benedickta felt a rush to explain, but this woman had heard explanations be-

fore. Mme. Simeon withdrew without a word and kept to her cabin the entire voyage. It was obvious she was here by command and under protest.

"She thinks Simeon and I are lovers," Benedickta said blithely to Emma.

"One must avoid the appearance of evil," Emma said. "He can be very charming."

"Yes, he can, can't he? But then he's very ugly. A prince turned into a frog."

Warm-ups went well. There were no phones to unplug, no mail to read, no invitations to decline. Benedickta limbered the instrument, shut herself away with scores, adding roles, feeling out new possibilities. The absence of sound was more than silence and within it she visualized the Countess, Manon, Carmen.

Palma de Mallorca was their first port of call. Cruise ships lying at anchor, lights strung from bow to stern, made it a scalloped fairyland.

In the morning the harbor master greeted them. He and Simeon were old friends, and customs was hardly more than a token. Although in general it was far from a formality. There was so much smuggling into Mallorca, the Spaniards treated it as a foreign country, with inspections at both ends of the Palma–Barcelona crossing.

Simeon poured the man a Cognac, and he and Benedickta went ashore. Margarita departed for a weekend at her home, taking Madame and Emma with her.

Palma was a delightful city, the beach area small, the esplanade broad and lovely, with strolling tourists of all nationalities. The houses were built one against the other in soft pastels. A hexagonal fountain splashed in the plaza. According to Simeon, it was turned on only during the season. "Mallorquins are an interesting people. They don't speak a classical Spanish. Lying so far out toward the African coast, I imagine, they are quite a mixture. Some say their speech is related to Provençal. Anyway, Mallorca was a center of Republican opposition, and Franco destroyed most of the male population. That's why there is a dearth of men, you see mostly boys or the very old."

The narrow streets wandered haphazardly past markets, jewelry shops, clothing stores. Honking *motocicletas*, which carried as passengers young girls perched sidesaddle, and the shrill blast of taxis kept forcing them against the walls. Benedickta purchased a bottle

of suntan lotion in a *farmacia* wedged in an angle between two alleyways. Outside the shop she saw a sign advertising hamburgers, but Simeon, who had been taken in on a previous visit, insisted it was pressed fish. They lunched instead at the Hotel Victoria and made a meal of *sopa de gamba,* an iodine-flavored shrimp peculiar to the island.

As they left, walking leisurely toward the harbor, they were overtaken by an out-of-breath gentleman, delighted at finding them. A flood of Mallorquin Spanish proclaimed him the proprietor of the *farmacia.* He held out an item that made all plain, Benedickta's sunglasses. Apparently, while making her purchase she had forgotten them on the counter. The proprietor immediately closed his shop. Though it was the height of a busy day, he banged down and locked the iron facade and came in search of the owner of the glasses.

Simeon attempted to offer him some pesetas, but they were refused. He was happy, he said, to have restored the signora's property.

"How amazing to find a people like that, who put personal relationships ahead of business. I hope he didn't lose too many sales."

"I will arrange for a small anonymous gift," Simeon said.

Benedickta smiled. A moment later she frowned. "You don't suppose he recognized you?"

They resupplied at Syracuse, putting in at the larger harbor on the west side of the bay, half enclosed by the island of Ortygia. Simeon took the ladies to see the fine baroque cathedral whose Doric columns rose from a temple to Artemis.

Simeon was busy with his camera, a wide-lens Leica. Photography bored Benedickta. It was all there graphically in her mind. How could you photograph the gentle zephyr or the happy mood of the party? It always had to be cut off in a frame.

Simeon and the captain conferred about the next phase of the trip. Rather than make the two-hundred-mile journey around the Peloponnesus, they decided to take the canal at Corinth. "It's an extremely narrow passage, somewhat forbidding, with sides rising three hundred feet. We'll switch to power and get through as fast as possible. It's only four miles long, so it's no problem."

The modern city was not remarkable, but they gathered above decks when they came within sight of the ruins of ancient Corinth. lying at the foot of the eminence of Acro-Corinth, impregnable and

heavily fortified from archaic times. Benedickta had the feeling of sailing backward in time as the isthmus opened into Greek waters.

"The wine sea," Simeon said.

Later, as the sun flattened against the horizon, she found him alone topside. She joined him at the rail and he spoke without turning. "It is this hour, the last two minutes of sun illuminating the world, that Socrates is supposed to have drunk the hemlock."

She watched a wing of sky bathe the ocean pink, watched the color deepen, spread and disappear. "Are you sad tonight?"

"I've been listening to you. I didn't know a throat could make such liquid sounds. Tell me, when you sing a new role for the first time, do you have stage fright?"

"It doesn't have to be a new role. Whenever I sing in public I'm almost ill beforehand, sometimes I have terrible pains in my stomach. What helped me most, I think, was talking to a Japanese student who had just passed those terrible examinations to enter the university. His uncle, who had passed them years before, told him, 'Take them as one already dead, that way they can't hurt you.' So that's what I do, the day of a performance I wake up and tell myself, 'You're dead.' It helps, it really does. You don't feel so much, so there's not so much terror."

"You asked me once what I do when I'm not actively working. Let me ask you the same question. What do you do when you are not performing, or cruising the Mediterranean?"

"Let's see, I like to window-shop. I don't buy much. I never go to the movies for fear of catching a cold, so I watch the late show on TV, especially if it's British. I like British movies. Or yours. I like yours very much. I don't like anything artificial, amusement parks, clowns, frightening rides. I hate zoos. I can't bear to see wild things caged."

"That's because you are their sister—a wild thing. And no one has ever caged you. Not even your last husband, whom you still love."

"You know about Jeff? . . . I left him, didn't I?"

They were under full sail, gliding through black water. "Sometimes it is hard to be your friend, Benedickta. Most of us talk to explain ourselves. You hide in words. I think you talk to conceal yourself."

"Do I do that? I don't know myself very well. All my reference points are gone. . . . Do you know I had a child once?"

He was surprised. "No."

"It never breathed. I think of that sometimes when I'm singing. I sing and he never breathed. So, tell me, why do they kill ice-cream vendors?"

"I didn't know they were killing them."

"Oh, yes, I got a copy of *The New York Times* in Syracuse."

"Did you also read in the *Times* that Benedickta Roland, famed Queen of La Scala, is aboard the Simeon yacht? They are speculating what it means."

"Yes, well, we settled that in advance. I don't think you should have forced your wife to come. She hates every minute of it."

A gibbous moon had crept into the sky, it kept pace with them. "I am going to divorce her."

"But why?"

He smiled, his beautiful long-lashed eyes making her forget the disproportion of heavy nose and jaw. "I cannot answer that yet."

She felt the same stirring inside her as when a role begins to come alive. Would there be an Act II? Was Benedickta to live again? "You know those self-imposed rules you don't approve of? Suppose I changed them?"

Her words unleashed him. His hand was at her lower back, urging her forward, and she felt the hardness of his body. His hand slid lower, moving her rhythmically. Suddenly he was still.

She waited. Agile, for a large man, he brought her down on a pillowed deck chair, spanning her, turning, readying until her body was open to his.

She lay lazily relaxed and in tune with herself. He bent over her. "I have flown seas and sailed skies," he murmured.

"You knew this would happen, you counted on it. And so did I." She watched him zip himself into pants that outlined what they hid.

"I look at my body with distaste," he said. "I don't want you to see it. It is old, the skin no longer firm."

"You're the sexiest man I've ever been with, and I think you're well aware of it." She was surprised to hear herself say this, but it was true. The deftness of his touch, his self-assurance, never allowed her to forget who he was. The power he exerted over her had been felt around the world on the big screen. A man of international reputation; such was Benedickta's lover.

"Democritus once said orgasm is like an attack of apoplexy."

Benedickta laughed quietly in her throat. "For the rest of the voyage we must consider ourselves cured."

"The voyage is not that long. In a day or two I will be showing you Athens." He lifted her hand to stroke it. "I feel very deeply about you, Benedickta, more deeply than about anyone in years. You move me to delight and to fear. Let me show you the swan road . . . there, that expanse of moonlight on water. The early Phoenicians gave it that name."

"Why do you say 'fear'?"

"Because I am an old man. Tonight you don't see it. One night you will."

"I can't promise, Wen." She used his nickname for the first time. "I just know that I hoard the feeling of you inside me."

"When picking out skis," he said slowly, "remember the best are fiber glass and epoxy, with Fischer bindings."

"But we are sailing to Greece, to Athens."

"We will be many places, you and I, on many continents."

Not until they anchored at Piraeus did Madame Simeon emerge from her cabin to disembark for good.

Shortly after, Simeon took Benedickta ashore. "This modern harbor has been dredged and rebuilt to accommodate today's shipping," he told her as the tender docked. "The new road was supposed to lead into Piraeus, we'll meet it in a minute or so." A Porsche was parked and waiting on the dock, a man tipped his cap and dropped the keys into Wen's hand. Benedickta settled in, adjusting the seat belt, and they eased out of the crowded quay. The first sight was unscheduled, a corpse being conveyed to the cemetery strapped to the luggage grid on top of an old Fiat. It was tightly bound in a sheet.

Simeon stopped the car. She could see he was upset. There was a *taverna* beside the road. They took an outdoor table and he ordered a banana cordial. "That's a nice vista." He was obviously trying to collect himself. "There, the chapel dome outlined against the sky." Before starting out again, he bought two bouquets from a flower vendor. One he ceremoniously presented to Benedickta. But she was curious about the other.

"This? Oh, you'll see."

The terrain they passed was so bleak shadows hid under the rocks. Wen brought the car to a stop by a roadside grotto, a crude shrine in which hung a crucified Christ. He swung over the door and laid his flowers before it.

Benedickta was astounded. "Wen, what was that about?"

". . . This is such an abandoned site. I always leave something when I pass. Just as I have turned prayer wheels in Tibet and scattered white feathers in the West Indies to Obeah."

"You?" Benedickta asked. "Wendel Simeon?" She suddenly felt she did not know him.

He laughed as he raced along the road, and then slowed for crossing sheep. "Of course. In ancient lands such as this, sophistication always breaks down. After all, I'm twice your age, Benedickta. I feel the need to propitiate as many gods as possible."

By the time they reached the Kolonaki district, where an apartment had been rented with a view of the Acropolis, it was evening. Not until the following day was Wen allowed his role of guide.

Constitution Square is where one always begins and he took her there. At one side stood the old palace, which now housed Parliament. The royal gardens were the city's largest park. Every hotel and café set out small tables at which Athenians sat through the afternoon, sipping Turkish coffee and indulging in the national pastimes, football pools and politics. Tourists seemed to comprise at least half the population and spawned a subpopulation which lived off them. Islanders from Kalymnos, hawking sponges scooped from the sea around Crete, called after them. Boys sold lottery tickets displayed on long poles. Pistachio sellers vied to exhibit their wares, grown on the island of Aegina.

The Acropolis hung like a tapestry above this commotion, serene, remote. Rose-colored in the distance, it was colorless as one entered. Benedickta was touched by the massive yet delicate proportions of the Erechtheum. The marble maidens supporting a roof on their heads seemed part myth, part legend and part woman. She studied their stone faces for an insight into the women she portrayed. Simeon photographed her.

Sounds, smells and the rugged islands that were submerged mountain spurs--all became a jumble. When Benedickta closed her eyes she saw only the deeply blue, darkly fringed eyes of her lover.

Yes, she had taken a lover, the most exciting man she had ever

known kissed her on the wild prominence of Deja, rocked her with the rocking of *Barka* in his cabin, held her on the beach at Syracuse, knew a sandy cove where they bathed naked and made love. She experienced a strange, exciting sensation when he lifted her buoyant onto him. They attempted it underwater and came up spluttering and laughing. But Simeon always completed what he started. And she was glad to give herself, to remember she was a woman.

When the cruise was over and she thought of it, it was Simeon, the feel of drowsy hours, the convoluted moments when he lifted her into that tossing maelstrom where nothing matters. I'm in love, she thought in surprise. I am in love.

They couldn't be parted. She said she had to rest, but he called the same day and asked her to dinner. She had never been in his Rome apartment off the Via Veneto. He was standing with the doorman to greet her. They kissed as if they had not just separated.

He took her up and flung open the double doors.

"Oh, yes, it's like you, Wen. It had to be high, looking down on the city, airy, full of tasteful and exquisite things. Let me see the bath, for me the most important room in the house . . . oh, marble, sunken tub . . . elegant. And I love the library, the half-story is dramatic. Is it to house your films?"

Simeon had been trying to keep up with her. At last he plunked himself down on a couch in the living room and watched her as she examined a Motherwell, glanced at herself in the mirror over the stairs, ran her hand along the balcony, tested to see if the fireplace was wood-burning.

"It's yours," he said.

She was so caught up with it, the paneling, the ivory chess set, that she didn't hear him, that is, she heard, but she didn't assimilate what he'd said. Of a sudden she stopped. "What?"

"For all those scrapbooks Madame keeps piling up. I decided they need a home."

Benedickta sat down suddenly and hard. "Is this my house?"

He took something from his vest, an envelope, and tossed it to her. "The deed."

She touched it, but didn't pick it up. "It's an awful lot to give someone . . . even for you."

He laughed. "It's a tax shelter."

She jumped up and began pummeling him. "I don't believe you!

Tax shelter! It's a wonderful, beautiful spot to keep my scrapbooks. I'm sure they'll enjoy every amenity. I think I should move in too, don't you? To keep an eye on them."

"By all means, you, Madame, Emma, Margarita . . . I had them all in mind, each has her quarters."

She came up behind the couch, leaning over him. "What about us, Wen? What about you and me and the scrapbooks moving in?"

"I don't think so, we'd spill over onto each other."

She sighed. "You're right. I'm a terrible person to live with. You'd move out in a week. And I don't imagine you're much better. You don't know how to relax. You call what we just did, traipsing around the world, relaxing. I, for one, am exhausted. My feet hurt and I've three performances to give of *La Gioconda*." She bent over farther and her hair trailed in his face. "You don't have to buy me expensive apartments, you know. In fact, my darling, you don't have to buy me a penny's worth of anything. Just look at me with those blue eyes—now that you're so deeply tanned, they're bluer than ever. They shade into all the deepest pools of colors and I will do anything my heroines ever did for their lovers, including being buried alive like Aïda, walking into flames like Norma . . ."

"Hold on, hold on. None of that is necessary, I assure you, but you could do me one small favor."

"What?"

"I said small, don't look so suspicious."

She laughed and sat beside him.

"After your performances I want a few days alone with you."

"I thought you were starting another picture."

"I've postponed it."

"Oh? That's not like you."

"I need more time with you, Benedickta."

"How long?"

"A week."

"A week, well, of course, certainly. A week can always be managed."

"I want to take you to England."

"England? I don't know why I am surprised. Where, in England?"

"Salisbury."

She shrugged. "I don't even know where it is. But we'll go. Of course we'll go."

* * *

It didn't happen. Because of her La Scala debut, offers came from America, the Metropolitan, Chicago Lyric, Houston. Covent Garden also wanted her. And there was a proffered contract from Paris Opera for the following season.

Benedickta accepted the American bid. She wanted to go home. She took special pleasure in the welcome on the front page of the New York papers.

For the first time she performed her repertoire without adding new roles. She had prepared them aboard *Barka*, but she did not feel they were sufficiently polished. Simeon joined her, flying over for her Met debut, *I Puritani*. In her rooms at the Plaza she found a remarkable rosebush. It had been grafted to grow two distinct types of roses, one red, the other a coral whose inner petals were bronze.

Of course it was from Wen. "It's us, Benedickta. Different as we are, we grow together from one stem." Among the gifts he lavished on her was a wall of recording equipment. "To practice with," he said. But there was a more serious purpose behind the gesture. "You must listen to the record companies. You should record. It is your posterity."

"I need an audience, Wen. I need that electric thrill back and forth."

"Record your great roles."

She stopped arguing. He was right.

When she was tired and her voice refused to climb, they broke for coffee, and she came back rested to insert a single note.

"This is engineering, not music," Benedickta laughed.

Simeon escorted her everywhere. The mayor of New York presented her with a citation. She found herself surrounded by people. One person she met as from another life was Wolfgang Menetz. She was glad to see him. At first she couldn't understand why, since she had despised and hated him as she had no other person in her life, with the exception of Laverne. Then she realized that it was quite simple: he was her past. He proved to her she had a past. Also now there was nothing to quarrel about. It was all so long ago that she couldn't believe she had ever cared what he did. He himself was well preserved, but his career had faltered.

Wolfgang was extremely gallant, he swore he had never missed

one of her opening nights. "The way you encapsulate a role! No other singer has that gift. It is uncanny. What do you draw on? What inner strengths? The world has always been curious about great singers. Do you know they autopsied the larynx of the famous tenor Tamagno, who created Otello?"

"And what did they find? Was his larynx something extraordinary?"

Wolf shrugged. "Just like anyone's."

"They did the same with Einstein's brain," Simeon put in, "with the same result. It seems it's not so much what you have as what you do with it."

He did not care for an ex-husband turning up. But she had forgotten how amusing Wolf was. He was living with an author who wore white shoes in the middle of winter and had an eminent physician on call to treat, diagnose and kill off the characters in his novels. "How are you yourself, Wolf?" Benedickta asked.

"Busy, thank God," he lied, and then blurted out, "but I don't sleep well." This private revelation embarrassed him and he set about to rectify the impression with a typical Wolf anecdote. "Have you heard the latest? Closing night of *Tosca*, you know who appeared onstage in the buff? Absolutely. It's fact. The audience had gone, of course, but our friend walked through the entire third act, even managing the famous suicide leap from the parapet to the mad applause of stage hands and house technicians."

She laughed. "You're outrageous, Wolf. I don't believe a word of it."

This was the social life she had missed. She must not judge it quickly—but try to understand that these were successful people who played as hard as they worked, perhaps harder. They wanted to accept her into their ranks, they wanted to honor her. Perhaps it was wrong to be critical. Simeon took her home to the Plaza. "What did you ever see in Wolfgang Menetz? He's as old as I am!"

He hadn't finished with Wolf. "Did you ever notice that there is a certain type of person who considers insomnia a mark of distinction? I don't like to think that you ever slept with that man."

"And had his child."

"I suppose he furthered your career?"

Benedickta looked at him.

After a pause, Simeon said, "I have no excuse for my remark,

except my feeling for you. Did I tell you the divorce is in the works?"

"One stem?"

"One stem."

"Will *Barka* be our home? It seems appropriate. We are both such gypsies."

There was a communication from the president of the Italian Republic. Upon her return to Italy she was to be presented with the honorary title *Commendatore* for her services to Italian opera, an award usually not given either foreigners or women. She celebrated by taking a lease on a villa in California. "Malibu, in the hills, space all around and an ocean of white water in front. Madame found it for me. It's a place to rest. Rome is a working location. I need both."

Wen agreed. "I should have thought of it myself. What will you have as a nightcap?"

"A Bloody Mary." Six months ago she had been uncomfortable ordering a drink. She'd say, "I'll have what you're having," and when it came, not like it. Wen was a Scotch-and-water man. She'd started to dabble with various mixes, and could now rattle off a half dozen. This was more what she expected of herself—a lover, parties, houses, the ability to order a Bloody Mary. She particularly liked meeting Wolf and being worldly enough not to hate him. In fact, finding him amusing. She felt she was at last making her life mesh, giving Benedickta her role. She was living as she expected to live. When she suggested flying to California in the morning to inspect the newly leased house, Wen agreed.

It was a Spanish hacienda, mission tile roof, balconies spanning vistas of sea. "Didn't Madame choose a fabulous place?" Benedickta said, dancing through it. "I knew she'd do a good job."

"I noticed a couple of horses in the stable. Do you ride?"

The excitement of the flight, of exploring the house, evaporated with his words. She was riding Guapa along the dusty roads of Valle de Bravo. Her subscriptions to the journals had long ago run out and she had not renewed them. Jeff was dead, but in a different way from Mark and Harry. Somewhere he labored and accomplished important things. It gave her pleasure to think of that, but it was a bloodless, intellectual pleasure. Then why did the thought of

mounting a horse again, of riding . . . overwhelm her? "I rode at one time."

"Have you ever ridden along the beach?"

"No."

"We'll do it in the morning, before breakfast. And then . . ."

"And then I must practice."

"Of course. But I warn you there will be a small housewarming in the evening."

She was amazed. "Do people know we are here already?"

"Of course."

It was marvelous cantering along the water's edge. She rode a roan mare who tossed her head as she inhaled the salt spray and felt it flick her side.

They were in shorts and Wen allowed his horse to plunge into the breakers. She gave her animal more latitude and it also entered the foam, its slender legs engulfed. The horses rolled their eyes and nickered with a frenzied joy. They returned, using the pass under the coast highway, climbing back to the estate. "I like to take care of the animals I ride." Wen dismounted and rubbed down his horse. Giving it a final pat on its flank, he turned to Benedickta. "Do you like the mare?"

"Oh, yes. She's beautiful."

"Then she's yours."

"You are responsible for the horses? I thought so. I had a horse once. This time I prefer—just to ride her headlong through the surf, but not to feed her, not to love her."

"However you like," he said carelessly, then with sudden earnestness, "I want you happy."

"I am, Wen. We live on high, like that canter. It's exhilarating, and I adore you."

"I live as a young man," he reiterated.

"Yes, I know. It's the way I live onstage, at full tilt."

"Every minute must be like that, every minute of life. That is the one sin I recognize, the sin of waste, not being, not doing."

She looked at him quizzically. "But you are 'not doing.' As far as I know you haven't started a new film."

"I am waiting for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. Our trip to Salisbury. You've not forgotten about it?"

"No, of course not. But what's that to do with your work?"
"You'll see."
"Tell me."
"I can't. I have to show you."
"We'll go back then. Make the reservations."

When it was known Benedickta Roland had arrived in London, Queen Elizabeth sent around a personal note, requesting a private concert.

"You don't mind, Wen? I'd love to do it."

Simeon acquiesced with a graceful shrug. "One does not reject such an invitation. She may dub you Dame Benedickta."

Benedickta laughed and prepared the mad scene from *I Puritani*. The Queen was in residence at Buckingham Palace, and it was there she performed in the crystalline ballroom before a select group, the royal family and members of the Cabinet.

Afterward, presented to the Queen, she merely inclined her head. It was the Queen who embraced her. Years before, she had declined an audience with the Pope on learning she must kneel and kiss the papal ring. An American and an artist, she bowed to no one.

"I've been patient as hell," Simeon reminded her later in the week. "What do you say to running down to Salisbury today?"

"I say, why not? After all, that's why we're here, to get to the bottom of this mysterious project of yours. You *are* making a mystery of it, you know."

The cathedral city of Salisbury was an eighty-mile drive from London in the southwest part of the country. They spun along for a time by the River Avon. The city itself was laid out in checkerboard fashion, and their timber-framed hotel gave a medieval impression.

A hand-done afghan lay spread across a four-poster. "I adore it," Benedickta said, snuggling under with him. "And tomorrow we see the cathedral?"

"It's very impressive. Early Gothic. The spire is the tallest in England, just over four hundred feet high."

"More of your trivia?" she teased.

"And more to come. It has the oldest surviving clock in England. And the first to strike the hour."

"Fascinating. But, darling, does our being here really have something to do with your next picture? Is this to be the setting? Can't you give me the least bit of an idea?"

"Of course. It has everything to do with it. But right now I'd rather talk about *you*. What fantasies do you have when we make love?"

"Fantasies? No. Not when I have the reality of you." She stretched against him, her glossy black hair covering them both.

The cathedral was in the midst of a stately park known as the close. "All the cathedrals in Europe are in the middle of cities. This is much grander," Benedickta whispered.

One had to whisper. It was so old, begun, the guidebook told them, in 1220. They approached the west facade, which was screen-like in its rich ornamentation, reaching three stories, towers, horizontal tiers and niches becoming an integral part of the structure. The imposing spire climaxed like a chord.

As they entered, Benedickta caught her breath. Vault ribbing rose in unending series from the triforium of colored stones, and where they met and interlaced overhead it looked like the branches of heaven. She thought of Bach chorales. She thought, If only Harry could have seen this.

Simeon led her to the Lady Chapel, dedicated to the Virgin. Its columns erected on incredibly slender stalks of unattached Purbeck marble had the effect of tethering the swelling vaults.

They moved through it in wonder and then sought the sunshine of the close. "Thank you, oh, thank you, Wen, for bringing me here to show me this."

He was observing her intently. "But I didn't."

"You didn't what?"

"Bring you here for this."

"Well . . . well . . . ?" She shook her head, a half smile on her lips. "It's time you told me. Why then?"

He answered with a single word. "Stonehenge."

"Did you say Stonehenge?"

"This that we have looked at is thirteenth century A.D. Now I'm going to take you back almost four thousand years. More than a thousand years before anything we saw in Greece. Get in the car, we will drive to the Stone Age."

"But why the cathedral? It was marvelous, glorious in fact, but if you're going to do something with Stonehenge as a background . . ."

"Not background, it's the central theme. And the reason for the cathedral—I wanted you to see something ancient, but still from your world. Those were direct ancestors who built that amazing church. But we don't know the people of Neolithic time. Only that they too were builders of sacred places."

He signed to the driver, who pulled over. "From here we walk." It was a great plain. She instinctively sought his hand. Because in the distance was the first large circle.

"It is believed today that this is a remarkably accurate calendar. The shadows cast by the stones at sunrise mark the time of year."

"My God," Benedickta said. Immense monoliths of single rough stones, roughly cut, just as they were hauled from the quarry, formed a great outer ring. Some of the mighty giants had toppled, but most stood with massive lintels athwart them.

"They think it may have been a site for sky or sun worship."

She hardly heard.

"Some of these megaliths weigh up to fifty tons each."

She didn't care what they weighed or that they were thirty feet high. She approached slowly, deferentially, and laid a hand flat against the ancient warm side. She understood what it was. She saw beyond the first circle, to those stones of smaller stature, then a broken ring of five. Inside this line was the innermost compartment. Many of the monsters lay broken at her feet. She moved forward drawn to the altar slab, then turning, strode to an erect monument which cast its shadow like a shaft, down the very center of the altar. She knew it. It was the slaughter stone. "I want to go back to the hotel," she said in a voice scarcely audible.

In the car she sat hunched away from him, pressed against the door. "Norma could have sacrificed at that blood stone."

"Let's stop at the pub for a glass of port."

She shook her head. At the hotel she said, "I have a headache, I'm going to lie down." She lay fully dressed on top of the covers. Simeon did not go out, but stood silently looking at her. "You're

going to sing Norma there. That's my plan, that's what's been germinating. You sing your greatest role, the Druid priestess, at Stonehenge. Stonehenge was not built by Druids. No one knows who built it. It is older far than any peoples we know of, but there is no doubt the Druids made use of it."

"They sacrificed there," she said with no intonation. "Sing Norma? Sing Norma at Stonehenge!" She jumped up from the bed and flung her arms around him. "It's the idea of a lifetime! It's incredible, that you thought of such a thing. You *are* a genius. Imagine, *Norma* sung among those—those ancient horrors."

"For me too it is the pinnacle, the high point of my career. Nothing I have ever done has touched it. It will be the most daring, most inspiring of my films."

"Your films? What are you talking about? I thought I was to sing Norma at Stonehenge."

"You are, don't you see? And I will photograph it. Immortalize you in your greatest role."

"Wen, please don't talk nonsense." She was watching him with eyes that seemed to elongate.

"It's not nonsense. It will be incomparable."

Benedickta folded her arms across her chest. "It's not what I do. I'm not one of your plastic starlets. I'm Benedickta Roland. I don't make films."

"The world changes, my dear Benedickta. You will be the first great diva immortalized on film."

"It's an insane notion. I know you're not serious, Wen. To sing Norma at Stonehenge, now that is something. I must have sung Norma I don't know how many years. Yet standing there by that blood altar, that terrible stone, I knew I had never sung it as I could. But the rest, a movie, bringing Hollywood to Salisbury, it's crazy and I won't hear another word of it."

"But you will, my darling, you must. *Norma* is my next project. I've taken copious notes, the financing is arranged, the cameras ready to roll."

"Cameras! Lights! Places! Take one thousand . . . no, thank you."

"Benedickta, I know you have this prejudice . . ."

"Prejudice! *Nom de Dieu!* Don't talk to me. We don't understand each other. It is plain to me. We are from different worlds. How did we even think they could mix? Go back to Le Club, to *Barka*, to

your friends. We have nothing in common." She began muttering imprecations in Italian, in French, from all the operas she had been in.

"All right. We won't talk about it anymore tonight."

"Not tonight. Not ever."

"Very well. All right. Only . . ."

"There you go, talking about it!"

"But we must talk about it, don't you see? You must give me very sensible, very coherent reasons why you don't want to do it."

"It isn't that I don't want to. I can't! Lights in my face, cameras dollying . . . is that the word? . . . dollying after me. What is my audience to think? And the retakes. You see, I know how it is done. What do I do, turn to a packed amphitheater and say, 'We're going to do this little bit again'? I tell you it is ludicrous."

"Please be calm, Benedickta. I never intended to film a *performance,* for Christ's sake. The picture would be finished before rehearsals even start."

"Impossible. The musical world, *my* world, isn't ready for this bastardization of the arts."

"Bastardization!" He was livid. "Innovation. Don't you see, there will be a rush to film all the great operas."

"No. Can't you get it through your head? No! No! No!"

"All right, I can say no too. Then it is *no* to *Norma* produced in this setting. Either you will sing Norma at Stonehenge or I will get someone else."

She looked as if he had struck her. "Someone else?"

He remained unmoved. "I am going to produce *Norma* at Stonehenge."

"Get out of my room. I hate the sight of you."

It didn't help that he left. There was no rest for her and sleep was out of the question. She got up at some hour of the night, dressed, put on a sweater and walked mile after mile to Stonehenge.

She was stopped at the sight of the first circle. *Cromlech,* the word fell over the brink of time, not even Celtic. . . . The great single stones, the menhirs, towered above her. Did these names come to her from another lifetime, or because she was Norma, or from the brochures scattered on her bed?

She began to move in somber rhythm among the dolmens, two colossal uprights supporting a single horizontal member. She knew the gods of this place and walked among their passages. Only *she*

knew they were passages through the graves of her people. The large stone slab in days gone by led to the burial vaults.

She, Norma, a daughter of the warrior caste, of high nobility, had borne children secretly to a Roman. Here, among these unchanging, unmoving monoliths, she voiced her crime. She began to sing wildly to the night, to the stars, to the great spirit of the stones in which her love was hewn like rings in trees.

Very early in the morning Simeon found her in the inner circle against the altar. He picked her up and covered her with a blanket.

"I must sing Norma here."

"I know."

A technical crew moved into the sleepy suburbs of Salisbury, followed by actors, singers and extras. Wardrobe caravans and makeup coaches rolled in.

Benedickta shut herself away. Madame thought it wonderful that she was in the forefront of a new art form. Emma was numb at behind-the-scenes views of actual film-making. She was an ardent moviegoer. But Margarita was tight-lipped.

"Simeon says *Norma* will reach an audience of sixty million. Think what that means," Benedickta cajoled her.

Margarita's expression remained severe.

"We will be introducing opera to the whole world. Besides, I have always been an innovator," Benedickta defended. "I've always taken chances."

"Where you *knew*. When you were on certain ground," Margarita pointed out.

"I have faith in Wendel. He is a great producer. The best. He will do a marvelous job. And for me, it may be the most important Norma of my life. It is true I am worried, yes, I confess it. But how else could I finance a run at Stonehenge? I will make opera history. And I will grow in the part. I feel it as I never did on the boards of a theater. I am reincarnated Norma. Can you understand?"

Margarita said, "Who knows? It may work. But an al fresco performance is always a danger. And you have never attempted one. It takes tremendous projection. What if there is a wind? Your voice could be carried away."

"We will begin work with messa di voce exercises."

"But you must not sacrifice the tessitura."

"Nothing will be sacrificed. I will be superb." Nevertheless she

went to Wendel with the problem of voice production. He solved it on the spot. "A shell, we place an enormous acoustic shell behind you, like at the Hollywood Bowl. And in the rear, we'll move in portable dressing rooms."

He thought of everything.

"I don't want the camera to bother you," Simeon told her, "none of the equipment should distract you. It is here to help. Each has its own job. The camera is a versatile tool—it gives the impression of being everywhere at once. It approaches, withdraws. The telephoto distance shots tell one story; zooming in for tight close-ups, another. The real ability of the camera is to see in greater detail and more selectively than the human eye."

Benedickta nodded unhappily, convinced the camera *would* bother her. She knew that the stars of motion pictures were extremely restrained, almost expressionless . . . while she, whose every motion must be as clear to those in the last gallery as to the dress-circle goers, she, with her large movements, her large voice, was not a suitable subject for this eye that saw so minutely. It would be a catastrophe, she knew it. But Simeon assuaged her doubts, and his confidence reassured her. He seemed to be everywhere, finding time for everyone, disposing of difficulties as they cropped up. Finally he had what he called a shooting script, which he explained was essentially a plan of the sequence in which the scenes would be shot.

"You mean," said Benedickta, "it will all be out of order?"

"It's a question of cost. You shoot your crowd scenes first and then let your extras go."

"But it will be so mixed up. I don't know if I can do a good job."

"When have you not done a good job? This is *Norma*."

"Yes, you're right. I suppose I'll get used to it."

The first thing to get used to was that everything started at an unheard-of hour in the morning. Benedickta, who performed nights and slept until noon, was up at 5:30 A.M. She appeared in the mobile dressing room with the star painted on the door, stationed behind the shell, still half asleep. Makeup was a laborious process, with none of the bold strokes she used for outlining and emphasizing her features. The base was heavy, but the shading extremely delicate, almost what would be worn socially, except for the false eyelashes and the fine black line drawn inside the eyes. Care was

taken when her mouth was painted, and a decision made to use clip caps over her teeth. She had to admit she was becoming beautiful. She looked like her mother, she looked like Mark. But she felt artificial.

Simeon dropped by to chat and apologize for the early call. "Daylight is not only the strongest light, it is also the cheapest."

"Simeon, I am scared to death."

He laughed and blew her a kiss, he was off to decide about framing. "What is framing?" she asked her wardrobe mistress.

"That is when you temporarily exclude the star or important action to focus on some small detail . . . hands . . . or dark clouds . . . it heightens the suspense." Meg was her name and she was a comfortable, plump, middle-aged body who came with the caravan. "Mr. Simeon's fond of framing. Did you see *Journeys*? There he used oblique sideways framing so that when the lovers walk naked on the beach, they seem to be floating."

Benedickta slipped into Norma's long shift and cloak. That at least was familiar. She was paged and entered the set, for that was what the great stones had become.

Her position was marked in chalk, she took it. There was a dispute about the shooting angle. Simeon felt an upward point of view would enhance the subjective fear. Jude Nettor, the director, said it would give a shut-in expression, he favored a close shot.

Finally they agreed to do both and decide at the rushes. "Just mark," Simeon told her.

They spent the afternoon retaking the scene from different angles. They lit her from behind to obtain an ethereal quality and from above for a spiritual effect.

The next evening she watched the rushes with Simeon. She saw the high priestess of the Druids. She saw Norma. And in an odd way it was not herself, but an idealization built on the planes of her face, strangely abstracted from her, made other than she was.

An enormous amount of publicity was being generated. La Scala begged her to bring *Norma* to them. They would hold December 7. She talked it over with Simeon. "I have a terribly heavy schedule. After Stonehenge, *La Traviata* in London, and some television."

"A December seventh opening? You can't turn it down."

"Of course you're right. I can't. I mustn't. Promise you'll be there."

"Do you think I'd miss it?"

"Oh, Wen, you'll drop everything? There is a Benedickta then, or you couldn't love her."

"What do you mean?"

"Not a collection: Norma, Gioconda, Violetta, Elvira, Leonora, Butterfly, Lady Macbeth, Anna Bolena, Turandot?"

"My darling, it can't be sorted out. That passion you bring to your art, you bring to me. It is what makes you La Regina."

"Yes. It cannot be sorted out. You are the best, Wen. And you want the best. There is no use even asking would you love me if I were not successful, of course not."

His smile was tinged with exasperation. She knew the look. "How could you be you and yet not you?"

"Exactly. We have what we want in each other."

Simeon held all the reins. He sat late, viewing, selecting, interchanging. He was up as early as she, but she had to turn in.

It was months before she sang. Even the most careful singer did too many things with her face, the mouth opened too wide, or the forehead wrinkled, or the smile on the high notes appeared strained. Just marking she was guilty of these faults, and thanked God the singing was to be dubbed.

She sang Norma in a London studio. And here Benedickta found she was at the mercy of a sound engineer, whose function was to modify the sound much as the cameraman selects his images. Sitting in a world of his own, cut off from everything in his glass booth, the world coming to him only through earphones, he had the power of life and death over her as he mixed the treble and the bass according to some secret formula of his own.

When Benedickta heard how he had modified her top notes, she screamed herself hoarse, and everything was done again.

"You are wearing yourself out," Madame said, "you look like a scarecrow."

"Simeon wanted me thin. The camera adds ten pounds."

"The camera . . . the camera . . . it is too much to pay. To sing against such a background, I admit, was inspiration. But you will not be able to stand up when this ordeal is over, let alone sing."

"Don't scold, Cecily. I'll eat more *salèpi*, if you want, but for the love of heaven, don't scold me." And to Madame's consternation she began to cry. Someone must have called Simeon because he was there, not businesslike, but warm and loving, as though he had all the time in the world to spend with her. And later in the week their

rosebush arrived from America without a petal mussed.

Benedickta had no clear idea of the film. She had seen so many shots, and protective shots, such varied angles and lighting, that she was thoroughly confused as to what was in and what was out. When Wen told her it was done, they killed a bottle of champagne and made hazy and languorous love.

Now that the picture was out of the way, what Benedickta called "the work" started. Forgotten were panning shots and zoom lenses. She was back working with Norma. She approached the part in a new way.

She told Emma, "No calls."

The immense scale to which everything was pegged, the passion of the great stones had been taken into her own nature. Lying deep, under layers of civilization, fierce disruptive zones stirred and ruthless unreason that was true only to the roots of its own catastrophe. Benedickta dreamed herself into other times, wrapping herself in the primitive soul. She had played Norma for years, but she was playing her for the first time. Could a human being love with such hate? She must believe it. She must murder what Pollione loved, never mind that she loved them too. There was only an end in sight—that is what most terrified—there were simply acts that led to other acts. And in this matter-of-fact manner that engendered its own inevitability, she played Norma.

The opera opened. A moon came up through the megaliths. The monumental blocks of stone seemed the land itself raised in cosmic upheaval. The audience knew without consulting their program notes that night was closing on the sacred Druid altar.

Benedickta made her entrance, appearing before her people. The stones seemed to throb with ancient blood deeds.

Fearing for the life of her Roman lover, she prayed for peace. Her gaze was inward as she addressed the Moon Queen, while the Druids hymned vengeance.

Her notes floated, "Ah! bello, a me ritorna." Part II began with an orchestral introduction which prepared the audience for Norma's extreme agitation. She tells Clotilda, her faithful confidante, that even as she loves, she hates her children. In this scene there was no limit to the coloration her voice was capable of producing. When Adalgisa entered to confess upon her knees that she had broken her vow of chastity and pointed to the Roman, Pollione, Benedickta's power surged as she abandoned herself in the electrifying trio, "O! di qual sei tu vittima."

Norma's crazed anger of Act II she handled by becoming still. The stillness continued. Not a person in the vast amphitheater moved during the reverie. It was now she plotted her crime, too terrible even for her. At last she smiled a smile that chilled everyone who saw it, bitterness was part of it, but the larger part was gratitude. She knows what she will do. She watched Tabby step into the open eyes of her mother.

She sheds her humanity, like a mad thing she champs and rages, feels for her dagger to murder the sleeping children. Benedickta's hands, always expressive, seemed part of the music, they also sang; her gesture, unconsciously that of Alexandra pulling her to her lap the night of the suicide.

Her five-month child, dead before he lived. The small untended grave in Arcegno—No, she cannot. She cannot. Adalgisa joins her in the magical "Mira, o Norma."

But there is still the Roman. She rouses her warriors. "Guerra! guerra!" War! war! She attacks like an explosion.

When Pollione is dragged before her, Benedickta rises to heights never suspected, even by her. "In mia mano alfin tu sei!" "You are in my hands," she gloats. But the realization of the terrible death he must endure is too much. Impulsively she claims the death for herself. She recites her guilt and her people cover her in a black mantle. The funeral pyre is heaped high . . . the flames of expiation.

When it was over, there was only silence. The audience had been traumatized. Then a storm erupted, which drew Benedickta once more before them, head bowed. What she had done was unchallengeable. No one who saw her would forget how she had taken their emotions apart singly and collectively, and put them back, yet not quite in the same way.

Benedickta was past exhaustion. The three dragons permitted no one near her but Simeon. He took her home, almost as shaken by

the performance as she. "Nietzsche said: 'One must have chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star.' You, Benedickta, have given birth to a galaxy on fire."

She returned from her triumph at Salisbury to a London triumph with ten performances of *La Traviata,* as well as two television appearances in which she sang arias from *La Gioconda* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia.*

Wen was also in London, but their schedules didn't allow them to get together. He phoned or she phoned before they turned in. "How's it going?" she asked.

"We're still pasting it together."

"Don't give me that, the word is 'splicing.' You see, I did learn something."

He laughed, but he sounded tired.

"You're working too hard, aren't you?"

"I'm looking at you all day, it makes me miss you."

"What do I sound like?"

"Great. It's going to be a great picture."

"Really?"

"Would I bull you?"

"I don't know. Would you? All I remember is relief when the cameras, the sound trucks and the cranes went away. And I could sing the whole thing through in the proper order. —So, I'm not too awful?"

"I told you, you're great, it's great. And it will be ready for you to look at Tuesday."

"Emma will say that I should rest, but I won't listen to her."

"I'll send the car for you at five and we'll get a bite after."

She found that she was excited, looking forward to watching herself perform in a new medium.

Wen sent the studio limousine, and as it made its way through London traffic she found her expectations rising. Also it was good to be going to Wen. After this current season perhaps another voyage on *Barka.* Sun and sea air. How easily one became spoiled, but why not? Next time they could put in at all those out-of-the-way harbors. Swim from the deck. The limousine pulled up at the gate and they were waved inside.

Wen was wearing an ascot, he looked distinguished, but the deep

tan had faded. When he kissed her she kept her eyes open to see the sweep of his lashes.

"It's been too damned long," he said as he took her inside. They were alone in the theater. The usual X's flashed, then the familiar orchestral strains, *Norma*! It was subliminal, she didn't need the titles and the credits that started rolling underneath. Incredible, there they stood. Shot from below, the megaliths were potholed, grainy, and she shuddered looking at them.

The massed Druids, the warrior elite moved among the grave paths, converging on the figure of a woman. Norma—Benedickta! There she was. *There*, more than here. Austere, her face white, masklike, hiding all thought, all emotion, even her humanity. Wonderful what the camera could do. She had been standing there wondering if she had come up exactly to the chalk mark. And what she saw on the screen was serenity and quiet power. She squeezed Simeon's arm. Visually it was wonderful, the ominous rushing of fate was prefigured in the muted colors, in the choreography of the chorus.

But with the opening phrase of "Casta Diva," a death chill covered her, paralyzing her limbs. The sound! They had tampered with her sound, turned it up, turned it down, quickened it, slowed. . . . She put her hand to her throat, literally gasping.

Simeon became aware of her. "Are you all right?"

She couldn't answer.

"Lights!" he called. "Stop the film."

Benedickta was in an aisle seat, she stood, drew in a breath and slowly let it out, the world spun with vertigo. She waited for it to straighten. "Simeon, dear as you are to me, and you are dear—I will never speak to you or know you again if this film is released."

"What?" He grabbed the arms of the theater seat, his knuckles whitening. She walked up the aisle and back. Very softly obscenities fell from her lips, in Italian, English, French, German.

"Benedickta, what in God's name is the matter with you?"

"You don't know music. Wen, it's frightful."

"I employed the best . . ."

"*Paid* for, you mean. I've no doubt you paid for the best, but you didn't get the best. What you got is—is some sound engineer playing with dials. It's simply terrible. I must have your word, your oath, that you will never release this."

"Benedickta, believe me, you are wrong. Everyone who has heard this adores you."

"Wrong? I am never wrong about music. *It* is wrong. If this were to be released it would undo me, I would be finished, a laughing-stock, an object of ridicule. It must not happen. Promise me. Goddamn it, Wen."

"Calm down. I swear, you are overwrought."

She whirled on him. "Don't patronize me. We are talking music."

"Benedickta, we've never had a disagreement, never fought. But you've got to understand, I'm as much a professional as you. You haven't seen it, or even heard it. Don't make a judgment from a few bars. They can be changed, we can loop in another sound track, use another sound man."

"No. No palliative measures. I won't compromise Norma. Not any music, but especially not Norma. Cinematographically it may be the seventh wonder of the world. I don't know. I'm no judge. But musically it's a disaster. There's no more to say, Wen. You can't release it."

"There's nothing in your contract that gives you veto power."

Her voice came at him still and deadly. "You've used me, Simeon. You bought me. The cruise, the apartment, the production at Stonehenge . . . it was conniving. This rotten picture was in your mind from the beginning. What a bastard you are. What a lousy bastard."

The words were uttered low, reasonably, factually. It was he who lost control. "No, I swear. None of it's true. You can't believe it."

"Then scrap the picture."

He caught up to her in the parking lot.

"Okay. All right, if that's the only thing that will satisfy you."

"Call me in the morning," she said, "and tell me what you've decided."

"I'm telling you now, goddamm it."

"You haven't had time to think it through. Call me tomorrow."

"It's not true that I planned it from the beginning. You've got to believe that."

She turned to him, watching his expression intently. "When, then?"

"In Syracuse. I got the idea seeing you against those great fluted columns. I even took some stills of you. Remember? I thought, She looks like Norma. And then I thought . . . Stonehenge. The apart-

ment wasn't part of it. I didn't bribe you. It isn't fair of you to think that."

"You did bribe me though, holding out the performances, the actual opera at Stonehenge. How could I resist that? And you made it plain, it wouldn't happen unless the movie happened."

"I have a career too, you know." He grabbed her against him, buried his face in her hair and neck. "But I'll do what you want. I love you, Benedickta."

"One stem?" she asked.

"One stem."

Her whole body quivered and her arms went around him.

By the third performance of *La Traviata* Benedickta was in trouble vocally. Partly it was overwork. And she blamed herself for that scene with Simeon. She must not let herself get so upset. The vocal cords were stiff, although she tried to limber them by her usual exercises. The resident Covent Garden doctor was finally called. He diagnosed hysterical aphonia.

Benedickta was scornful. "Stage fright? Who do you think you are talking to?" Refusing a shot of Vitamin B-12 in the buttocks, she sent him away.

The top notes were affected. It seemed to her the trouble was in her sinuses, which were plugged and prevented resonance.

Madame, for some reason, was convinced that the liver was at fault and boiled up *salèpi*. Benedickta practiced an hour at a time to realign her voice. Then she rested and fretted. Again, the slow gymnastics of tongue and larynx, muscles that had worked for her in the past.

Up to curtain time she had faith. She got into costume, made up, but the voice was not fully there. In complete panic she called a conference. Everyone was of a different opinion. For a Benedickta Roland evening there was never an understudy. The audience came to hear her.

Emma begged them to cancel. "Refund the money."

Madame kept repeating stubbornly that Benedickta had never canceled.

"Then what shall I do?" Benedickta implored.

The house manager ended by going before the curtain and announcing the state of Benedickta's health. "Nevertheless, Madame Roland will sing. But she begs your indulgence."

Other singers had done this, it was not even an uncommon thing to do. But she had the strength of an elephant and she had never been brought to this. She was furious at herself, blaming the two television appearances. She had taken on too much. No one could handle what she did.

Her anger and the humiliation of the announcement started an increased flow of adrenaline. While the voice was not strong, at least she was able to proceed. At the conclusion of the evening there was a large ovation, but it only embarrassed her. She knew it was a tribute to her effort, not her voice.

She finished out her contract. The voice rebounded and London went wild. The press claimed hers was the most magnificent Violetta in memory.

Simeon did not join her as he had promised for December 7, the opening of La Scala. She was bringing her Milanese her new Norma, and Wen was not there. He sent flowers, a note . . . business. She crumpled it without bothering to read it.

Once more her sinuses were stopped up, the resonating chambers filled, so that she had difficulty hearing accurately. From the first notes of supplication, she pushed her voice, forcing it. There was scattered booing from the audience. She had never heard the sound before. An impersonal rumbling thunder reached the stage. At first she didn't know what it was, then the pores of her body ran sweat. The muscles of her throat tightened. She tried to sing higher, as a pilot attempts to get above the weather. She tried to sing through her face, the cartilage, the bones, bypass the uncooperative throat.

The storm from the audience increased. How could there be enemies out there? Who let them in? A dark hostile mob had invaded her territory. They were standing, singing her aria like drunken men in a trattoria.

No . . . she pleaded . . . you are my friends, you know my strong style, you've heard that open unfurling E flat in alt. Please, I'm Benedickta Roland. La Divina. You yourselves followed me in the streets, you've heard me a dozen times. You love me. You made me. You know I am Queen of La Scala.

She strangled. The voice was gone. She stood before them naked, impotent.

*"Morendo!"* the audience cried. "You're dead up there!" *"Strascinando!"* Benedickta fell with no net to catch her. She col-

lapsed on the floor of the stage. . . . It was the old nightmare. . . . This isn't happening —My friends, she tried to say. She made an attempt to rise. Something was thrown, it splattered and soiled her. The curtain was rung down.

Future performances were canceled. She slipped out of Milan at night. Not one of the dragons knew where she was.

Outside Rome there was a fair. The rides were not electric, the ferris wheel turned by a dozen hands. Confections, freaks, a booth for fortune-telling, games of chance, of strength, and a tent for tattooing. Benedickta entered the tent.

"Signora?"

"I want a design that is special."

"For yourself, signora?"

"Yes."

The thick gnome of a man, whom lavish signs proclaimed an artist with the needle, began to show her lover's knots, hearts and male names.

She shook her head. "I want a knife."

"A knife? I do not understand the signora."

"I want a knife, a dagger. Can you do it or can't you?"

His professionalism was called into question. "I can do it."

"Show me. Draw it."

He drew a long dagger with a lean blade.

"Yes, that's it." She let her skirt fall, then stripped herself of brief underpants.

"Where . . . ?" He whispered the word.

"Above the pubic hair. Here." She indicated the place. "I want it plunging down, the tip lost in the hair."

He looked into her face, there was no reprieve for herself there. "*Madre mia.*" He motioned her to lie down on a filthy draped couch.

He went to work with a small sharp stylus. The pricks were rapid, staccato. He rested his hand, from which hairs sprouted, against the division of her flesh and began a slow grinding with his palm. She lay without movement, allowing the operation to continue. In getting a better purchase, a dirty fingernail slipped. The heel of the working hand separated her. A paroxysm seized her body. "Knife! Knife!"

The terrible cry paralyzed the man. He stepped back from her and abruptly put away his tools. "It is finished, signora. Come tomorrow and I will add more color to the blade."

She got up, put on her clothes, paid him and left.

She walked to the apartment, where she was recognized by the doorman, although she did not recognize herself.

When she woke, Emma was regarding her with mournful eyes.

"You know what I worry about, Emma? The seashells. When I was a child, my mother took Mark and me to Brighton. There were so many shells. Where do you think they've all gone?"

"Shhh!"

Benedickta started to hum under her breath. It was nothing in her repertoire. Emma listened carefully, the tune was familiar. Of course, it was an old round—"White Coral Bells."

"We used to play double solitaire," Benedicta said. Perhaps an hour later she continued, "Mark knows I cheat. I cheat at Russian bank too. He doesn't care. In fact he likes it, because he beats me anyway. I cheat, but I don't lie. Isn't that funny? That is, I lie to myself, but not to other people. Except once. Once I lied. I had to become Benedickta Roland. *Remember who you are.* I remembered one day in Valle de Bravo. I kissed Guapa good-bye. A horse has the softest mouth, like velvet. Good-bye, Guapa, good-bye."

Things were decided around her. She knew that and she didn't mind. It was a convenience because she could float in and out, be there when it suited her and think inside herself when she wanted to get away. Simeon was there. She was pleased. He also decided things, and that pleased her too. One of the things he decided was that a few weeks aboard *Barka* would make a new woman of her. Emma agreed. They all agreed.

Simeon filled the room with flowers. She hated their smell. Their juices poured through cut stems into tepid water. It stank. He bent over her, his beautiful eyes full of concern.

"Do you dye your eyebrows?" she asked.

"Don't squint at me," she told Margarita. "I don't like it."

"You're only fighting yourself," Emma told her.

"That's nothing new. I've done that all my life!"

Sometime later she mumbled, "Flagstad never coddled herself. She believed in hardening. She walked around in the coldest weather with her coat collar open. She . . . Oh, my God!" Benedickta jumped to her feet. "La Scala! It didn't happen, did it?

Emma, Emma." She grabbed her. "Please, Emma." She let go suddenly, digging her nails into her own flesh. "I thought I could be a Patti, a Malibran. I'm sorry, Mama. I'm sorry I didn't get into your lap that night. Look, Mama, no tears. There are no tears on my face."

Healing must be from the inside. She took the tonic prescribed, drank the port Margarita insisted would build her physical strength, ate Madame's Rumanian-Turkish slop. Slowly she became tranquil. She slept through the night, no longer screaming herself awake. Her pallor began to disappear.

She went to the doctor's office for a complete examination of her throat. The instrument was not affected. Once she was convinced of this, recovery was fast. But she was full of new dissatisfactions. She made an agenda. First she must win back her position. Prima donna assoluta. No, she was muddling things again. First was to obey Madame, Emma, Margarita—everyone knew better than she. Eat, rest, take walks, get sun. Then with new strength she would turn and fight. Wen would help. His divorce must have become final. And the doors of La Scala would open again, if she had the courage to open her throat. The sound would pour as liquid as before, with resplendent top C's. She could hear the response: *"Molto, molto bella! Bellissima! Bis! Bis!"*

What happened had been an accident, like falling off a horse. Everyone knew the cure for that was to mount and ride again. And the sooner the better.

Wen had been in London six weeks on business. When he reappeared with more flowers, she was glad. "Is *Barka* outfitted?" she asked.

He hesitated. "I thought perhaps the inactivity of shipboard life . . ."

"Rest, Wen—not inactivity. It's just what I need. Really it is. Except you've fallen in love with a lady novelist? No, let's see, a diplomat's wife, no doubt?"

"Mona did give a party, what you would call a humdinger. She's scheduled for rather serious surgery. So she had a face-lift . . . to be presentable in either eventuality."

"I feel far away from all that. I hardly remember."

He cut into her moodiness. "You want to sail, we sail."

"Oh, Wen, the Mediterranean again? Malta, Gibraltar, Lisboa?"

"Malta, Gibraltar, Lisboa it is!"

She hugged him. Those places, she had just decided, would give her sun, and, coupled with fresh sea air—strength. It took a great deal of strength to be Benedickta. It would take more than ever now.

They were to sail from Genoa. She met Wen there. Their afternoon ashore he promised an escapade, "which will lead to the best dining in Italy."

"Why is it an escapade?"

"Because we descend these stone stairs into the old section of the city. The parallel, I think, is that in your country you follow the truckers when you're on the road. They always know the best short-order houses. Here in Genoa, we will follow the sailors. This will lead us to one of two establishments. And since it is just noon, I think we will wind up eating."

They dogged the steps of three Neapolitans with insignia and red tassels on their caps. The spot they entered fronted on the water. Wen was as much at ease in this workingman's hangout as in the sumptuous hotels he patronized. The food was not ordered, but served according to the day. Pasta mixed with clams, lobster, crab and something Wen claimed to be octopus, was brought to their table. The wine was light and washed down a sauce that had simmered into a soup thickened with fresh vegetables. This was ladled over the main dish. "Was I right?" Wen gloated.

"I don't think American truck drivers ever had it as good as this."

They boarded *Barka* directly after their meal, and Benedickta stretched her arms to the sea. "How at home I feel! I was so right to hold you to your promise. You really didn't want this trip, did you, Wen?"

"Why, that's absurd."

"I'm glad, I'm glad it's absurd. Timing is important, don't you think? That we want or need something at the same time is marvelous. Tell me, Wen, what was the business in London?"

"I was on the telephone a lot."

"You're never at either end of a direct question, are you, Wen? Talk to me about yourself."

"London was exciting. And there was time for old friends. I've a good track record with my friends."

"What about your wives?"

"Not so good," he admitted. "That's because they've never been my friends."

She should not have brought up wives. Undoubtedly the last Madame Simeon had taken with her a few more millions than he cared to part with. But Benedickta longed for things to be settled. When the public turned on her she was overcome with a sense of how alone she was. There was no one to talk to, no one to be part of. She wondered that Wen didn't speak of marriage now that he was free. Perhaps he thought she wasn't recovered enough for anything major to be thrust at her. Or perhaps it was the successful Queen of La Scala he wanted. If that was so, she only needed a few months to recapture her position. He often quoted Winston Churchill: "My tastes are simple, I only want the best of everything." And why not? It had been a long climb for him too.

Wen's first marriage, as he related it, had been one of convenience. His wife's money joined to his built a power base from which to operate. His second marriage to a titled woman opened the doors of international society. Now if he wanted the Queen of La Scala, toast of the Met, star of Covent Garden, idol of Paris Opera to grace his table, be hostess to his guests, preside over his houses and on *Barka* . . . she would soon be ready.

"It was nice of you, Wen, to arrange this, to make it just the two of us."

"You could do with a rest, that was the idea."

She dropped her dark head to his chest. "Then let's make good use of the time we have."

"Right," and he suggested cards.

Dinners were served in the main lounge rather than in Simeon's stateroom. And he did not come to her at night.

Had her doctor talked to him? Had Emma? Was he being considerate of her? She did not know where she stood. She brooded, recalling what she had said in jest . . . that in the weeks she was ill, he had become involved with someone. But if that were so, why had he invited her aboard *Barka*? Then she remembered that he hadn't. It was *she* who reminded him of the invitation. Had anything happened in London? Nuances returned to haunt her. What had he said about his friends? That he was loyal to them. Was this a demonstration? One did not desert a sick friend. One took her on a cruise before dumping her.

She returned to her first theory. Wen was being considerate of her health. She reiterated during the day how fit she was, and what wonders the voyage had accomplished.

That evening at dinner she called repeatedly for champagne. "Wen, my dear, I plan to seduce you, but I need a little help. What should I do, streak across the room with my pubic hair on fire?"

"Did you think I didn't want . . . ? I was thinking of you, Benedickta."

"Well, stop thinking of me, damn it!" She turned her back on him. He came up behind her and kissed her shoulder. She twisted toward him and the next moment they were undressing each other.

Simeon exclaimed suddenly in revulsion, "A tattoo! What have you done to yourself? That's a ghastly thing to do to your body."

"Really?" She became rigid. "I thought it might be a turn-on."

"Can you get rid of it some way?"

"I don't want to get rid of it."

Simeon went on his knees and placed his mouth against the dagger. "You're right, it's a turn-on. Your whole body's a turn-on."

The slow indolent pace of previous sex was gone. This was frenetic, a desperate clutching, her nails bit into his shoulder. When it was over, he didn't lie at her side, but got up, sat in a chair and smoked a cigarette.

"I've never seen you smoke, Wen."

"I gave it up."

"So I see."

"You're wrong, you know, Benedickta . . . about the picture."

"Please, Wen. I thought we'd never have to discuss that again." He continued his silent smoking. "Except . . ." Her long eyes narrowed. "You *did* scrap it?"

"I know I agreed. I meant to junk it. You've got to believe that. I've gone back so many times to the viewing room, running it for what I thought was the final time. But I, I couldn't. I'm a film maker. I've told you how I feel about statements. My God, your statement as Norma, plus what I was able to bring to it, the nuances of mood, color, the discrimination of the camera . . . it was, *is* the best thing I've done. We added narration. You can't believe how that helped. If you'd agree to see it again . . . I brought in a top sound engineer, he's worked over every note, slaved over it." Benedickta shuddered. He didn't notice. "It's an amazing production. If you'd only see it. You're magnificent. You'll be proud, I know you will. Just as I am. It will go down in the annals of film-making. It's got an advance booking you wouldn't believe. It premieres si-

multaneously in every major capital of the world. You'll make a fortune, I guarantee it."

"Where is the nearest port?"

"What?"

"I want to be put ashore."

"Benedickta, in God's name, give me a chance. The picture is a colossus, it will gross billions—and it's brought you to the entire world. Sixty million people will hear your Norma. I know I promised you. But it was a promise I couldn't keep. I thought we'd attend the New York premiere. What do you say?"

"We're close to Lisbon, aren't we? Put me ashore in Lisbon."

"You haven't listened to me."

"I listened to you before. I listened to your promise. I believed you. I believed all your bullshit. One stem! *Mi tradi!* How many starlets have you pulled that on?"

"Benedickta, please. I don't want to lose you. I love you."

Her laugh rang through the paneled room. "You love me, do you? Well, I don't want an old man's love. You said someday I'd see it. You were right. I see you totally. I see a liar, a cheat and a disgusting old man. Old man! Old man! Old man!" She had jumped on top of the bed and taken the sheet with her, which she clutched as she yelled at him.

Simeon's jaw went slack, his eyes dimmed. He became old under her words, her scorn made him old.

The rest of the night she spent in her cabin. She felt sick and blamed the sea, heaving and rolling under her. But the tightness in her diaphragm was rage. She pressed her hand below her rib cage. It was stiff as a board. Rigid, from holding fury. Her hand slipped lower to the knife. A whole theater had rejected her. She had made herself ill pleasing them, stressing the instrument, trying too hard. Tonight it was one man who turned on her. But he was giving sixty million a chance at her. It seemed to her she was always in an exposed position. God alone knew what they had done to Benedickta Roland with this movie. Some idiot manipulated dials and changed the famous Roland sound. The sound she had given her life for, the sound that made her.

It was intolerable. And Wen had done this. She doubled over in the bunk.

The next morning she kept to her cabin, breakfasting alone. Around eleven they dropped anchor in Lisbon harbor. Benedickta turned from porthole to mirror, dressed in a new slack suit, and went on deck. Typically, Wen ignored the scene of the night before. "You look lovely."

She didn't answer him. One of the crew appeared with her luggage. "Put them in the dinghy."

She went straight up to Wen. "Good-bye."

She refused to allow him to hand her into the boat.

From a distance Lisbon looked like San Francisco, but as the tender put in to shore, Benedickta realized it was simply hilly. There was an impressive boulevard and just off it a sprawling hotel with wide lawns and a miniature lake on which swans rode. How have I gotten here? she thought, feeling bewildered. I shouldn't have made it so easy for him, I shouldn't have left *Barka*. But Wen accepted her decision. Two roses grafted from one stem—she believed all he told her, that he felt deeply, that they would be married. And she allowed herself to feel affection, more than affection, love. That was the only thing that could cause such hurt and misery.

It didn't help to be alone in a strange city. It occurred to her to look in her purse. It contained nothing but a few lire. She would have to wire Madame for funds. She would tell her nothing, but that wouldn't prevent her speculating. It wouldn't stop the media either. They would crucify her with this movie. Oh, how could she face it out?

She hailed a cab and pointed to the hotel. The driver touched his cap and brought her to the Moorish facade. He carried her bags up the steps, across the veranda, into the gold-arched lobby, and setting them before the desk, turned with an expectant smile. Benedickta took out her lire.

He shook his head, refusing them.

"It's all I have." She turned to the hotel clerk. "I'm Benedickta Roland." The clerk also smiled without comprehension.

"I'll need to wire Rome for funds. Money," she said in several languages.

The smile faded. "The senhora has no money?"

"I have, but not here. Not with me. I must wire my bank." She decided to leave Madame out of it.

"One moment, please." The manager was called. It was evident

that he also was not an opera goer. But he was observant, the clothes, the bags . . . then something clicked. "Ah, Madame Roland!" She was shown to a room.

It was elegant, a frieze of nymphs and satyrs ran around the walls, but it was high-ceilinged and without heat. It felt like a vault, the tomb in *Aïda*.

How could Wen do this to her? She had relied on him, on his integrity. . . . Oh, Wen, if I can't trust you, who can I trust? Had he really thought he could change her mind? Where music was concerned? No wonder he kept away from her. He had destroyed her.

There were rumors in the press that both her voice and strength were impaired. The major houses held back. Then the inevitability she dreaded. The Simeon film *Norma*, starring Benedickta Roland, was given its world premiere. She stayed in bed all day. Her head pounded from a dozen places, even the frontal areas of her face hurt.

She heard Emma bustling outside the door. A tray had been prepared. She didn't want it. That evening a paper was slipped beneath her door, that would be Madame. It meant the reviews of the picture were favorable. She stared at the printed sheet and finally got out of bed to retrieve it.

Favorable . . . it was a rave! They adored her. Her voice was extolled as the most fabulous instrument heard in modern times. Simeon must have employed a genius to rectify what she heard on the sound track. Or more likely the reviewer wasn't discriminating. It was Benedickta Roland, so it must be great.

But personal notes of congratulations poured in, telegrams, cables, flowers. There was nothing from Simeon . . . she had screamed at him, *Old man! Old man!*

She slipped out to see the film. Simeon had seized the magic of *Norma*, the hypnotic quality of her portrayal. The music was marvelous, her quality had been captured, a masterpiece created. It was not *her* Norma, but was stamped with its own beauty.

She had judged too early, too soon, torn up her life. She knew what to taunt him with, the one thing that could not be forgiven. Why had she not learned from her brother and his simple advice? "Shut up, Benka!"

Paris Opera suggested a benefit concert. It seemed an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that her voice was rested and intact. She prepared a Verdi-Puccini program and Paris was enthralled.

The manager of La Scala phoned personally to ask contritely if she would be gracious enough to replace an artist who had canceled for reasons of health. The role was Anna Bolena. Benedickta was maliciously pleased. She could again appear anywhere she chose, in any role, but this situation paralleled the one which had originally brought her to La Scala. It was a good omen. The tide had changed and she would show those Milanese she was not afraid, that she did not even remember that evening. She would leave them calling for her and then never set foot in Milan again.

It was a seminal period. Her voice flourished and Anna Bolena underwent the refinement that all her roles acquired through repetition. Milan was once again at her feet. It pleased her to condescend, to perform this last favor for La Scala. But when she took her final curtain call, she did not lower her head but gazed with the look of Benka at the darkened auditorium. She never again appeared on that stage or in that city.

The pressure of carrying an opera was something she was weary of. She preferred now to sing in concert, or to record, so she returned to the United States. It was convenient to be near the hub of the recording industry. She bought the Malibu house with the proceeds from the movie. *Norma*, the movie, had, as Simeon predicted, made her a wealthy woman. The renascence of her vocal strength convinced everyone, but it failed to convince her. The upper register seemed less secure. She thought she detected a reduction in both volume and range. Often in recording an aria her throat seemed to constrict and single notes were dubbed. Many times a recitative sounded to her ears shorn of its timbre and she was glad of the technical resources Hollywood offered.

After the last recording session she returned to the Malibu residence enveloped in panic. There was no doubt, and she would not resort to self-delusion. There was deterioration in the instrument.

Something was wrong. Her throat felt wrong. Her muscles tightened with effort when she sang. She sent Margarita on vacation, and made an appointment with a doctor which she broke. She warmed up more slowly, more cautiously. She no longer used her normal conversational voice, but spoke in whispers. She was so nervous and upset that no one knew which language would issue from her.

When Emma first heard the whisper, she bridled. "This from the first lady of opera? You never coddled your voice in your life. Why start now?"

"Emma, for God's sake," came the scarcely audible sound. "I know what I'm doing. Will you leave me alone!"

"I can't when I see you making an eccentric of yourself. Everyone is talking about it."

"Let them!" came the harsh, breathy sound.

"But there's no reason for it. There's absolutely no need. You're imagining . . ."

"Don't tell me about my instrument! I do what I have to do!"

Emma was frightened and retreated before the violent, desperate sound.

In the hacienda above the Pacific she woke one morning mute. She tried to whisper. But her throat had closed, she could barely breathe. Specialists were sent for. Benedickta checked into a hospital under an assumed name. Tests were run.

She faced the medical men, dressed and in a chair. There were three, Dr. Emery, Dr. Tuft and Dr. Golden. Benedickta fastened enormous black eyes on them. A hand flew to her throat asking, Well?

Dr. Tuft had been nominated to speak. "A polyp, Madame Roland, no larger than the head of a pin. It's an allergic reaction, probably caused by a sinus infection."

Benedickta was prepared with a pen and a sheet of paper. She began to write. Dr. Tuft anticipated her. "It must be removed."

Benedickta jumped to her feet, then, fumbling for the pad, tore a page on which she scrawled, "No one! No one touches my throat!"

"There's no choice," Dr. Emery said.

She wrote with extreme deliberation. It did not resemble the other handwriting. "It is a bad cold, nothing else."

"It must be biopsied, Madame Roland. Malignancy must be ruled out." The word lay surrounded by sudden quiet.

"We would expect to find it benign," Dr. Golden said. "Tumors of this type, in this location, generally are." She fixed her eyes on him and he continued reluctantly, "As for the effect on the vocal apparatus, we simply don't know."

Benedickta then wrote: "Tell me, Doctors, are the stars above or below?"

They looked at one another. Emery tittered, Golden looked stony, Tuft smiled. "Above, of course."

She closed her eyes. But unlike Turandot, she could not dispatch them for the wrong answer or because they were fools. She must submit herself to them. Would the scarring be much or little? And how did one sing over scars?

"The operation itself is minor," Dr. Golden assured her.

Minor . . . the size of the head of a pin. But it was the rough spot in the ice that sent the skater out of control. What would it mean for the Benedickta Roland diminuendo, which every singer in the world studied and none could imitate? And the formidable coloratura? And her E flat in alt?

"There is no other way?" She formed the letters carefully, "There's no possibility it will go away by itself?" She glanced at their faces. "What about drugs? Medication?"

"Surgery. And if we delay, the destruction of the surrounding tissue will be more extensive."

Her hand tightened on the pen.

"Do it."

The operation was to be performed under local anesthesia. "You will be heavily sedated," Golden, the surgeon, assured her. But she wasn't interested in that. She insisted on the details of the procedure itself. Exactly what was it they were going to do to her throat?

"The vocal cords must be exposed. This is done by passing a tube with a flattened end down the throat. With this we lift up a flap of tissue known as Jackson's anterior commissure."

"How can you see?" She wrote the question neatly on her pad.

"A light is passed through the tube, it illuminates the polyp. Then a laryngeal cup forceps is also passed down. Think of it as a long-handled scissors with a small cup attached. A simple snip, the polyp falls into the cup, all is withdrawn."

"But the blood. It must be drowned in blood." The writing was no longer neat.

"The laryngoscope suctions that off."

So many instruments scraping against her throat—

The consciousness-altering solution of vistaril and demerol was administered. She was a body on a cart, moving along halls. The

perforated acoustical-panel ceiling flashed by, made to swallow groans, cries and fears. *Remember who you are.* She tried to strike a bargain with God . . . not to wake up, or wake up a singer. But even in her fogged-out state she realized it would be difficult to succeed in dying on the table from a polyp the size of a pinhead. Who could she talk to if not God? Mark? Mark had a sign on his door, JKKE FORSTYRRES—Keep Out.

They were using a spray on her throat. She was at top C and holding. It was brilliant, a sound of liquid gold, of poured honey. Her head filled with it. There was a smile on her face when she opened her eyes. Then memory spun itself into Norma's funeral pyre—burning—burning— Both hands flew to her throat.

"The operation was very successful." Emma smiled down at her. "It's out, that thing that was causing all the trouble. They biopsied a microscopic section right on the table and it was benign, thank God."

Her throat was on fire, everything but pain was very distant. "Open your mouth, please," a nurse said. She hadn't noticed the nurse. "This is an antiseptic spray that will relieve the tenderness."

*Tenderness,* what a euphemism for fire scorching her vocal cords. The spray helped and she fell back to sleep.

The next days spent waking and sleeping, she wrote her needs on the pad by her bed. She did not write her questions. They didn't know, these specialists with their degrees and diplomas.

The only one to answer her fear was Emma. "It will be all right, you'll see."

Benedickta wrote on her pad, "Where's Margarita?" Madame had been in, but not Margarita.

Emma was prepared for this, she spoke casually. "She's taken a temporary position with New York City Opera."

Benedickta nodded and signed that she wanted to sleep. Margarita's defection meant dealing with a new pain—not raging as her throat had been, but a deep disquietude. Margarita did not believe she would sing again. Her opinion was perhaps more astute than any medical man's. Margarita had seen this before. Margarita knew.

To disprove the verdict, Benedickta filled her head and frontal cavities with a hum, then opened her mouth to softly, softly let it out. A hoarse whisper was the only sound in the room. It came from her, that terrible nonmusical sound. —No matter, it was a sound. She was no longer mute. And if one can speak, one can sing. It

would take time, retraining, but she would sing.

The main thing was to do it by easy stages. Never force. That had been the beginning of her trouble. Forcing had impaired the instrument. But the polyp had been removed. She would sing.

She would not sing. She would never sing again. Yesterday there was none to touch her. Now it was over. They had used a knife on her. They called it a forceps, a laryngeal forceps. But it was a knife after all.

She went home, back to the handsome hacienda in the Malibu hills. There was no reason not to go home. There was no particular reason for being there either. She had no pain. She felt well.

She found on her return that good wishes had piled up in the form of cards, telegrams and handwritten notes. Every notable in the music world expressed sympathy and confidence that they would soon be attending a Benedickta Roland evening. Norma, Aïda, Elvira, Violetta, La Gioconda, Butterfly, Turandot, Leonora, Tosca, Anna Bolena, Lady Macbeth, Lucia di Lammermoor—all her roles were mentioned.

The longest letter was from Nicole. Benedickta felt a twinge, how seldom she thought of the girl. Yet she was the only one begging to be allowed to visit, to help out. Perhaps she should let her come. It might be a good idea to have a young, cheerful presence around the house. The long outpouring stirred her. Nicole seemed to care. It was the only letter she kept. "Toss the rest out," she croaked at Emma, who had already disposed of the flowers.

Benedickta unplugged all the phones from their jacks. She did not return the calls Emma took from the kitchen and was not interested in inquiries. Emma kept the vaporizers filled, and filed off the deposits that encrusted the electrodes. Madame worked out a diet for her, no milk products, no fats. Each meal was served with a pot of camomile tea. She gargled a mild salt solution every hour.

Dr. Golden made house calls. "You are overanxious," he said. "You should be on complete voice rest."

Benedickta would not let him come again. Strange sounds seeped from under her locked door, a kind of guttural clicking.

"The great Caruso had eleven throat operations," Madame told her.

"For polyps?"

"Nodules, but they are the same thing."

"They are *not* the same thing. Why does everyone lie to me?"

A month passed with no improvement. Madame confided to Emma that in her opinion Benedickta was suffering from nothing but a psychosomatic, self-induced inhibition.

"I don't think so," Emma said, "I think she tried too early, while it was still in the healing process. I am afraid, so afraid she has permanently injured her throat."

Madame shrugged. "I can do nothing. She refuses my help."

"Be patient with her," Emma pleaded.

Several more weeks went by. An acupuncturist began arriving daily at 11:00 A.M., departing a half hour later.

Madame, with regret, accepted a post in Verona, "Only for the season. It is not the necessity of earning. You are very generous, but one must keep active. Otherwise, before you know it, you are a back number. Next season we will be together," she said, kissing her.

Madame! Madame, who had been with her from the beginning and fed her God knows how many plates of *salèpi.*

The household consisted now of herself, Emma and a Mexican boy who came in to garden, take care of the pool and wax the floors. She was alone with her battle. Perhaps it was best to fight stripped of cohorts. She had her own resources—herself, her technique, her knowledge of voice production and her body.

Her speaking voice continued hoarse. She used it as little as possible, returning to the muted whisper. She did not place a time limit, but worked alone in her room, twenty minutes four times a day. Abruptly the acupuncturist was dismissed.

Benedickta took her meals with Emma on the patio facing the sea. They were silent meals. During one of them, Emma said, "Nicole wants to come. She wants to be useful. Why not let her, Benedickta? This house is too large for me. I could use her help."

"If you think so," Benedickta murmured. But she was glad.

Nicole, when she arrived, was awkward and shy, not knowing whether to refer to Benedickta's trouble, yet afraid to appear callous if she did not. Benedickta was instantly sorry she had invited her.

With Emma the girl was relaxed, and Benedickta could hear laughter through the tiled passageways, or in the kitchen, where the two of them often sat. One could not but be aware that there was a twenty-year-old in the house. Her resemblance to Wolf camouflaged her prettiness for Benedickta, but she was attractive, with

the florid coloring of the Ticino peasant and her father's wide-set intelligent eyes. From the bedroom window Benedickta glimpsed her rambles about the place, or watched as she came from the beach, hair wet and clinging like a naiad's, towel around her neck. The girl reminded her of a self she had never lived, except briefly in Mexico with Jeff. It was painful to remember and yet it brought her pleasure.

Once Nicole had joined the household Benedickta retired even more to her room. She always breakfasted alone and frequently dined alone. For another six months she worked unremittingly. There was no change, not even in the huskiness of her speaking voice. A kernel of realization had lain in her from the beginning. Gradually it unfolded and she abandoned the work sessions, relieved that she wouldn't have to listen to the miserable croaking. Instead she installed a more elaborate wall of stereo equipment, a reel-to-reel that sent her own voice and all the roles she had sung resounding through the house.

She lay in bed and listened. It was Norma who told her what to do.

She had been dying in short bursts. Life had become a slow dying. Norma . . . Norma, the priestess who worshiped trees and sacrificed herself. . . . She lay with eyes closed, remembering that November, the city of Venice and her opening. The role wasn't hers, not completely—not until she communed with those massive menhirs. She had gone from strength to strength. The development of the aria "Casta diva" was unparalleled. What was the name of the singer who lost her place after the A? That was Mexico City—yes, Mexico City. She had held her own C while the orchestra found them.

Benedickta drowsed until the second act duet, "Deh! con te," spinning with marvelous control. She listened to "Mira, o Norma," anticipating her B flat. A flash of notes, then the beautiful effect on the quasi-cadenza, rising to top G before Clotilda's entrance. "In mia mano . . ." *Yes, I raised the dagger.* Her lips formed the words in Italian. Her mind joined her vibrant soprano. In mental duet they soared.". . . *l'eccesso! Un instante e d'esser madre mi poss' io dimenticar.*"

"Make it a glory finish," Harry told her. She had, her voice soared to a reverberating crescendo. Abruptly she switched off the

machine, preferring the sudden stillness, there was so much to be still about. She watched morning define the shape of the world, got up and went into the bathroom. Had she slept? She didn't know. Like Minerva's owl, her thoughts after dark flew in one direction. This was the first time the impulse carried into day. Nietzsche said: "The thought of suicide is a powerful comfort." A fellow insomniac, he wrote: "It helps one get through many a dreadful night."

When she came back to bed, the tray with orange juice, toast and coffee was there. She liked breakfast. Not only did it signal the end of an interminable night, but she actually looked forward to it. When Madame left, the Turkish-Rumanian slop was thrown out. She could again enjoy the smell of coffee, the refreshing sip of juice and the reassuring munch of toast.

She never rang for Emma before her second cup. As she poured it, she selected another tape, *Le Nozze di Figaro*. She settled back. How deliciously Mozart poured over one. The elegance, the style, the flow of musical forms blending revealing. That was Mozart's genius. Even in the farcical buffo settings, a human cry rang out.

She let her robe fall to the floor and stepped into her tub. She settled back, inhaling the scented oils; and lifting a shapely leg, she scrutinized it. She had decided on tonight. Music swelled in the passages of her head. Inadvertently she allowed it to escape.

Emma paused to listen. It had been a long time since there was any sound whatever at this hour.

Benedickta on her side of the door reached forward, letting more hot water into the tub. The Romans frequently accomplished their suicides in the baths, where the chill of death could be offset by heated water. But she didn't like the thought of slipping under.

No, not the bath. To eradicate the unpleasant impression, she poured in liquid bubbles, which foamed around her. The pretty things stuck together, prismatic, reflecting miniature rainbows, popping for no reason.

Benedickta Roland placed her feet carefully on the rubberized bath mat. She didn't want an accident or any such foolishness now that her plan was final. And it was final. She had been saving sleeping pills for months, putting them in different bottles so Emma wouldn't notice. Doing things right was a fetish with her. She liked precision. Her life and art were founded on it.

Not her life. Her life had been a consortium of confusion. Only in art she followed the certainty of a bright shafting star. She dried

with a heavy monogrammed towel and rubbed her face with creams labeled Moisturizer -4 and Protein MC. Dabbing everything with a Kleenex, she prepared for the day.

The last day, so surprisingly like others. No blue gelatin across the color wheel to darken the scene. No spotlight either. She had died onstage a thousand times in graceful despairing coloratura flutings or wild staccato grief.

But of course that wasn't the way of it at all. You had your usual breakfast and enjoyed it, took your bath, made your toilette and . . . here she paused, aware of the buffing machine below, waxing and polishing the floor planks. The sound clawed at her nerves. She decided to spend the morning in the garden.

She spoke at the bottom of the stair without pausing. "Good morning, Emma," and flinched at the way it came out.

Emma replied, her face undergoing a myriad of small changes to accommodate the smile.

When they questioned her, she would say, "She seemed as usual." And she was as usual. Except for a heightened awareness of things past. She thought of Mark, who had looked into this same abyss. She remembered begging, "Die first and show me how." And her terror because he agreed. She remembered later, when he actually was dying, he'd said to her, "Shut up, Benka. There are sick people here." She remembered two dandelions. She had stared long into the abyss. It now looked into her. Yes—that's what had happened.

She decided to do it in bed with the electric blanket on 5.

She went into the patio, where the Pacific Ocean was captured behind Spanish arches, and flopped into a deck chair. The sun was well advanced in the sky. She closed her eyes, seeing the spectrum of color before brightness drained. She opened them almost immediately, she must not miss a second of this day. She listened to Nicole's laughter. The girl was following Emma around the kitchen as usual. The laugh was merry, but more than that, there was music in it. Benedickta enjoyed the sound. On another day it might have annoyed her. She wondered if she should leave a note.

Of course not. What an absurd idea. The people she loved were over and done with years ago. Again laughter, rich with overtones she had not detected before. Yes, it was better to listen to the present than remember the past. Remembering made it worse, not better. A strange chill settled over her as she baked in the sun.

Infectious laughter pierced her consciousness once more. On impulse she called the girl's name. There was a moment's silence, then Nicole answered tentatively without leaving the kitchen, "Did you call, Madame Roland?"

The side door opened and Nicole was looking at her as though expecting her to deny that she had called. Benedickta rarely talked to her, but perhaps that full-throated laugh might mitigate the cold. Benedickta was trying to remember where she had stashed all the bottles. Panic gripped her, then she recalled putting some in with her stage makeup. She relaxed.

"Yes, I called. I've hardly set eyes on you." She assessed Nicole, taking her in with a glance. She saw youth and health. The Nordic paternal strain showed in the refinement of the bone structure. About the mother there had been something bovine, but the daughter possessed a quality both quick and delicate that reminded her of Wolf. "So tell me, have you finished your studies?

"Yes." She stopped what seemed to be a rush of words.

"For heaven's sake come from behind the door where I can see you. That's better. What will you do now?"

"Well, since I've finished school, I thought I should get a job or something."

"Don't look so ready to fly off. What kind of job did you have in mind?"

Nicole smiled uncertainly. She had never understood her position in the household. Sent to the finest schools like a daughter, but on the few occasions when she was with Benedickta she was treated as a servant, called and dismissed without formality. In growing up she missed a father more than a mother, because there was Emma. Emma's devotion was focused on the glamorous diva; still it was she who visited her, outfitted her, sent her presents on her birthday and at Christmas, a box of chocolates at Easter, a card on St. Valentine's Day. Nicole answered, "I'd thought some of applying as an usher at the Music Center."

"That's a rather surprising ambition for someone who's had the education you've had."

"Yes, but you see I'd be around music. I'd hear it."

Of course, Wolf's daughter. Benedickta realized how little she knew the girl. "You like music then?"

"How could I help it, with you as my—my patron."

"You have had a certain exposure, I suppose."

Nicole folded her hands in front of her like a child prepared to recite. "I want to say—I'm grateful, especially for the piano lessons.

"Piano? Oh, yes." She had quite forgotten. "I never cared for the piano myself."

"But you had the voice." Nicole said this, then flushed and looked away.

Benedickta smiled somewhat unkindly at her embarrassment. She felt no particular interest in her. Yet she detained her. "Tell me something."

"What?"

"That's up to you."

There was an awkward pause. "You mean," the girl said haltingly, "you want me to talk to you?"

Benedickta closed her eyes again, she merely nodded.

"Well, I don't know. . . ."

Benedickta pounced. "Never begin like that. You're a college graduate. You must know a great deal. Has any of it made you happy?"

"I tried to say, to express to you how very grateful I am."

"That's not what I asked. I want to know if you've been *happy*."

"Sometimes."

"Everyone's been happy sometimes. That must mean you've been unhappy." She examined the girl with more interest.

"It's just that I never knew exactly . . ." Nicole faltered.

"You're a bastard. I told you that once before. But not mine."

"Yes. You told me. My mother was your servant. But you never told me about my father."

"It would serve no purpose."

"You said once my father was a great man."

"I exaggerated. But he is a man of talent."

"I have a right to know."

"Perhaps you have. But I don't intend to tell you. As for interesting myself in you, it was sentiment. An idea that wasn't particularly sound. I've had a great many of them in my life."

"I'm sorry I've been a disappointment to you," Nicole said stiffly. "But you've been a disappointment to me too. You were never a flesh-and-blood person."

"You are resentful?" Benedickta asked speculatively.

"Yes!" She turned to march off, but Benedickta's croak stopped her.

"Yet you say you love music. So presumably I was an influence on you?"

"Of course. You influenced everyone who ever heard you." Nicole was crying. "You are the greatest artist this century has produced."

"Shall I confess to you what I am?" Benedickta's eyes were hard. "Or rather, was? I was the ultimate juggler, the finest technician perhaps that ever lived. I am the Babe Ruth of opera."

Surprise passed across Nicole's face.

"Didn't you know? It's ninety-nine percent craft. Like a trained seal or a high-wire act. Open your mouth, girl, and sing the C-major scale."

"What?" Nicole actually began to tremble.

"It's a simple enough thing. Surely you can sing the scale?"

"But I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't? You're standing here talking to me, aren't you? If you can talk, you can sing."

"But not in front of you."

"Forget me." Benedickta was at her most imperious.

Nicole shrank into herself. "I can't," she said in agony.

"Very well, just *say* it, *say* C."

"C."

"Now sing it, just C."

Nicole opened her mouth which was dry and parched. She sang C.

"D," Benedickta snapped.

"D."

"E."

"E."

"Now, C, D, E."

"C, D, E."

"That's it. That's not bad at all. Now give me the whole scale."

Nicole somehow negotiated it.

"Not bad. The voice is utterly green. But you're on key and there are certain overtones. I could teach anyone, *you*, for instance, to be a great singer. It isn't so much the instrument, although a Stradivarius helps, it's how it's played. Technique. Technique is everything. You work your life away to achieve it and then . . ." She stopped.

An alternative occurred to her. An alternative to Lorca's moon. She was mesmerized by the possibilities in the girl standing unwillingly before her. She envisioned a symbiotic relationship in

which a great teacher could live in the triumph of her pupil.

Life was holding out a reprieve. Did she want to reach for it?

Had she the strength to accept another challenge? It was easier to let go. She deserved rest, peace, oblivion. A lifetime of struggle had earned it.

Yet the possibilities enchanted her. "Nicole, do you mind. . . ." She waved vaguely with her hand, "I need to be alone."

With obvious relief the girl half ran across the grass.

"Nicole," she called after her. The girl's flight was arrested. "Nicole, are you physically a strong person?"

"Why, yes, I think so."

Benedickta threw her arm across her eyes. In walled-off private realms she considered, debated. She had left legacy enough. Hours on hours in recording studios, thanks to Wen. Yes, her roles lived, and her voice would live, the only part of her that ever counted. It would be listened to on radio, tape cassettes, and stereo hi-fi for time without end, amen. That golden instrument would sound at the touch of a button, the flick of a switch, the turn of a dial.

She was immortal. It was true there were roles she still had hoped to master, certain arias she had expected to make her own. She had never done Carmen. The Stradivarius had grown a polyp. What an ugly, ridiculous little word. She was lucky, everyone told her that, there was no malignancy. But then they didn't have to hear the terrible croaks, the near-silent click that had been her vocalizing for half a year. And with the drying up of the voice, the body became a shell, a husk deceptively tangible, but as void as her vocal apparatus. She was not only mute, but sterile. Sterility bounded her on all sides, a desert waste that could not be got through. She had accepted it to this last day. . . .

A reprieve? . . . One must be skeptical. On the four-acre estate there were spots that were exclusively hers. Benedickta sought one of these now, just outside the wall, leaning against it, facing the sea, the wind strong, lifting her hair.

A way seemed open. She could build a new instrument, hand down a technique. Her student would sing the unsung roles, perform the songs she had left till later. Their names would be coupled. *Benedickta Roland is her teacher.*

Was this a miasma induced by fear? She had attempted to picture the death that would involve every organ in her body. Each would struggle to live, and that was the agony. The lungs searching for

air, the heart for blood to beat against, the veins collapsing. All the parts constituting homeostasis violated—and by the same means her mother had used.

And then a girl's laugh, strong, full-bodied, with overtones that to a trained singer were significant. Wolfgang Menetz's daughter. There was talent there. She could develop it. She remembered what Harry had done for her, and all that had been added by the conservatory, by Bernard, Madame Cecily, Margarita.

She put it to herself another way, asking, What would it be like to wake with purpose? That decided her. She returned to the patio.

"Nicole!" The girl was still chatting with Emma. "Why are you always in the kitchen? I want you out here. I have something to say to you."

"Madame Roland?"

"Nicole, I have decided to teach you."

"Teach me?"

"Teach you to sing."

The girl looked into her face. "Madame, you can't be serious."

"We start tomorrow."

"I was in the choir at school, but no one ever gave me a solo."

"I can teach anyone to sing. You hear me, anyone!"

"Yes, Madame Roland."

Benedickta's eyes scalded. "You are not afraid of hard work?"

"Oh, no, Madame Roland."

"The body was the first solo instrument, never forget that. We start therefore by building the body. I want you in the pool at seven-thirty. Swim forty laps, nude, no impediments. Then we will breakfast together."

Nicole stammered, "You're really going to teach me?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"Yes, but . . . I can't take it in. Oh, Madame Roland . . ."

"Don't look so happy, my girl. I must remind you that you dislike me. Don't say anything, if you didn't dislike me, you'd have no spirit. And that's the one thing I can't manufacture. By tomorrow, I assure you, you will hate me."

"Hate you? Never!"

Benedickta smiled as if the prospect were a pleasant one. "I will drive you, work you, and keep you on a regimen so strict that a chain gang would seem a vacation. That's the way it's to be."

"It sounds so wonderful."

Benedickta nodded. "Let's see how long your euphoria lasts."

That evening Emma rapped at Benedickta's door. "You can't do this," she said.

"I can't do much of anything now. So tell me which of those things I still can do you've decided I shouldn't."

"I'm speaking of Nicole. The girl came to me terrified, ecstatic, both together, hardly able to tell me what had happened. 'Do you suppose she means it?—she can't possibly mean it, can she?' She kept asking that over and over. It took me a long time to realize you'd offered to teach her, to make a singer of her. You can't do it, Benedickta. You can't trifle with the girl."

"What a vocabulary you use, 'trifle.' I love that, 'trifle.' "

"I'm perfectly serious. She believes you are going to become her teacher."

"But I am."

"Benedickta, ask yourself, would Harry have taught her?"

"Maybe not, but I can make Nicole a first-rate talent."

"Even if that were so. Oh, my dear, think of your own life. With your genius, how hard it's been, a constant struggle. No time for yourself, or for anyone else."

"The girl wants it."

"Of course she wants it because she doesn't know what it is. You could tell her."

"Do you think she'd listen?"

"Benedickta, tell me the truth. Would you do it again?"

Unhesitatingly, swiftly came the answer. "Yes!"

"But you are Benedickta Roland."

"Yes."

"And who is she?"

"My pupil."

She woke with a sense of anticipation. She had been through fame and fortune and out the other side. She had come out the other side of much else too, but let that be. She went to the window and saw the pool churned. That meant she could not dawdle. She contented herself with a shower instead of her usual bath, put on a housecoat and received Nicole in the breakfast room.

The girl came in, the hair at the nape of her neck still damp.

"You don't know how to enter a room," Benedickta snapped. "You enter it as though you wished you were leaving."

That's exactly how Nicole felt.

"Go out," Benedickta ordered, "and come in again, as though you owned this house."

Nicole turned around, took a moment to collect herself and walked back in. "Better." Madame's words, engraven on her soul, issued from her: "That is the way you make an entrance, whether it's the stage or a manager's office. Shoulders back, chest out. You have attractive breasts, you should never hunch forward and hide them."

Nicole managed not to flinch as Benedickta continued to examine her. "I see you've had your swim. Forty laps?"

"Yes."

Benedickta nodded. "Breakfast is toast, fruit and juice. Thank you, Emma, coffee for me." She motioned Nicole to a seat opposite her. "Never forget that a singer is the only musician to inhabit his instrument, carry it around with him, wake and sleep with it. For the voice to be perfect, the body must be perfect. And when I say

body, I don't mean the body alone, I mean also the extensions of awareness and perception.

"If you've finished your breakfast, I'd like to take a walk with you." She broke off to push back her chair and pace the room. She tried to explain herself to Nicole. "This won't generally be part of what I ask from you. It's this business of forming a relationship. It is always difficult. And the relationship between teacher and student is perhaps the most difficult of all. I have a great deal to give you, but not the patience to be constantly gracious and pleasant about it. I have to spit it out. Now for our walk."

They descended to the courtyard and Benedickta took a path along the far side of the wall, overgrown, wild with drooping bluebells and a transparent weed that grew in clusters. The sea lapped at the canyon below. Benedickta took a great breath, pulling it into her. . . . The girl beside her was Benedickta; she, Madame Cecily.

"You must learn to be receptive. Reflect on this marvelous emptiness. It is what holds a composition together. It lies at the very center of music. It is the rests, the transitions, the tempi. It was out of the void that God created the earth. Today it is blue, dancing with hidden light, full of sun and golden dust. Tomorrow it may be gray and sodden. But it is important for you to feel and respond to it. You are not an artist when you sing, Nicole, but every moment of your life. You must do everything more intensely than other people. That is the function of an artist, to interpret the world, to show it new, different and alive. And to do this you must *take*. You must take from this vista before you, you must take from life, you must take from people."

Nicole stared, not comprehending.

This was the point around which it all revolved. Benedickta knew she must either give up or make the girl understand. She decided to lay bare everything. "You're here to take from me, aren't you? Think of it this way, how can you give except by taking? That's the way art works. The very first thing I took was my brother's life."

Nicole gasped. She could not explain to herself the emotion she felt for this woman whose hair whipped about her. She and Emma weren't allowed near. They might as well have been a pair of ghosts. She had actually been glad of the sounds that came from under the door, like a bullfrog croaking. She exulted. Even now she could not totally let go of her hate. But the hate was curiously

mixed with love. And at this moment, sudden pity. She reached out her hand to her teacher's.

Benedickta slapped it down. "Don't do that," she screamed hoarsely. "Don't ever touch me." She walked away down the path.

Nicole searched out Emma.

"Well, how did it go?"

"I don't know. Wonderful. Terrible."

"Nicole, I wish you would not undertake this," Emma said with great earnestness.

"You don't understand, I want to be like her. All my life I've dreamed of being like her. Remember the dress she gave me years ago? I still have it. I'll always keep it because it was hers. That gives it a special value—anything that's hers!"

"All right, if you must, you must. I've had my say. So, you're going through with it. That means you're on a diet. No sweets, no sugar or confections. No stimulants. And in your room, there's a pile of music she wants you to memorize. Also books, *Harmony, Counterpoint*, the *History of Music*, and *An Actor Prepares*, by Stanislavski. Besides the complete works of Robert Louis Stevenson."

"Why him?"

"I haven't the least notion, except . . ."

"What?"

"Eat your lunch. She expects you to rest, jog and have your voice lesson at four o'clock."

Nicole had a few hungry bites. "She said she killed her brother."

"Don't speak of him. We never speak of him."

"He's Mark, isn't he? I used to think he was her lover."

Emma, who was cleaning silver, set down her cloth. "Don't pry, Nicole."

"Why shouldn't you tell her, Emma?" Neither had heard her come in. "It's no secret that I had a brother. I don't talk about him because no one knew him. He was my twin."

"I'm sorry." Nicole had turned white. "It isn't any of my business."

"Why not? Everything about me is now your business. Mark's been dead twenty years. It's the only thing I ever held against him, that he died." The troll-like cackle continued. "Do you know what you do when a person dies, you throw away their clothes. Did you know that?"

"I'm sorry," Nicole said again, miserably.

Benedickta left them, going to the edge of the cliff. She could have kept going, flapping her arms in the belief that she could fly. Wasn't that what she was doing with this girl, trying once more to fly? "Be sensible," she called to a self that would not listen. She had already consigned herself to space.

The four o'clock lesson began. "There is a tape recorder on the table. It is for your use. All our lessons will be taped. A large part of your learning will be to play back and listen critically."

Nicole fumbled with the small portable.

"It's simple to operate. The red key is pressed for Record, the white for Off."

Nicole activated the machine.

"We will begin," Benedickta said, "by running up and down the major scale."

Nicole opened her mouth and . . .

"No, no, no, no. Take the cork out. Who knows, if you take the cork out, it may be champagne." These phrases were part of her, seared into her. "Let's keep with E. I will accompany at the piano to give you more confidence. Confidence is everything. No, again . . . Stop. You're breathing. You took an enormous breath. What are you going to do with all that breath? What are your plans for it?"

Nicole simply looked at her.

"If you don't need it, don't take it. And again." Benedickta's fingers raced up the scale. "You're breathing," she yelled.

"Sorry."

"Never say that word to me. I never want to hear it. What are you going to do, turn to the audience in the middle of an aria and say, 'I'm sorry'? Now sing in the center of the note." My God, how they were all with her. That was Bernard's constant plea. "Watch the movement of the tongue in the mirror. The more elastic the tongue, the better."

She familiarized the girl with the personality of the vowels. "*AY*, she heard Harry say, "is the root of all evil. Strike it from memory. It is not a single tone, but at least a triple vowel. *AH*, on the other hand, opens the epiglottis. It is the scale on which to measure your power. It is the kernel of every tone. *EE* vibrates and is brilliant.

Now with *OO*, the larynx takes a low position. But the thing to remember is that the vowels form your palette, the bright and the darker.

"Your voice is a well. The vowel, the bucket." She turned away, shaking. It's too much, I can't do it. Madame Cecily's counsels were easier. "Have you ever read *The Water Babies*? Mother Carey, when asked how she can simply sit there at the bottom of the sea and create life, replies, 'I make things make themselves.' And that's what I plan to do with you!"

She accomplished this sharing of herself and her art while keeping Nicole at arm's length. No overtures were permitted. She was constantly pushing her away. Emma was right, she must not trifle with the girl. But was she not doing much more than that? Was she not attempting to turn her into herself? She rejected the thought. She was a teacher, nothing more. She watched the work proceed in music and languages without letting up on the strenuous physical program. She knew Nicole felt pushed to the end of endurance, only to have some fresh torture added. She knew, oh, how she knew.

At the end of each ordeal, Emma appeared with a pitcher of juice, minus ice. There followed ten luxurious minutes in a Jacuzzi. Then toweled and dressed; another session. Benedickta quizzed her for forty minutes on reading assignments in both music and the classics. What was the symbolism, what the nuances? What did the composer hide, what underscore? What school influenced him, what people? She heard herself going on and on in that terrible frog voice.

The crucial lesson of the day—vocal technique—always took place in the late afternoon. Benedickta noticed with satisfaction that occasional notes began to sparkle. But although she explained in detail, Nicole had no idea how she produced them.

Benedickta shut herself away to think about this. Those rare notes made her hopeful. And it seemed to her she was hearing more of them. She decided to stop Nicole and point out to her when a note was firmly anchored. But her main resolve was a promise to herself, to be more patient, more forbearing. She smiled encouragement when the four o'clock lesson began.

The smile so unsettled Nicole that in a flight of delicate diluendo her voice broke.

Benedickta rose from the piano, quivering with fury. "How can you do that! How can you do that to me? There's no excuse for

it. You are past that kind of thing. It is not *you* any longer, do you understand? It is *me*."

"I don't know what happened." Nicole was crying.

"Of course you know what happened. We go back to lesson one. You breathed, and there was nothing, not a damn thing to do with that breath but choke on it. I never want to hear that again, never!"

Benedickta stamped out of the room more exasperated with herself than Nicole. When she returned it was to demonstrate a wonderful dexterity for coaxing lighter and fuller notes. Gradually she brought Nicole to a point beyond which she did not slip. Past that there was a great range of good, bad, better or worst days.

Nicole began to perceive the manner in which she positioned her tongue, mouth, uvula, and how it contributed to the tessitura. Intellectually at least, she understood where to test for resonating areas and how to control her breath. She knew, while it was still in her diaphragm, when it would emerge without distinction—but it was impossible to call back. On these occasions Benedickta did not even bother with a reproachful glance, but struck the chord again.

Then during an ordinary lesson, instead of reaching for a note, it dropped, a lovely pearl, into the room and into her ears. She found herself swept into Benedickta's arms, swung off her feet, twirled around. "You did it! I knew you could! I knew!"

There were tears on Nicole's face.

"Silly girl," Benedicka said, seeing them. "I told you you would sing. Didn't you believe me?"

"I wanted to, but it seemed so impossible. There was always such a gap between how I sound and how you want me to sound. And the exercises—sometimes I thought I would rather drown than swim another stroke. . . ." She stopped, horrified.

But it was a different Benedickta, warm and young, whose eyes were full of mischief. "Has it been awful for you? You think I don't know? You think I didn't put in the days you put in? His name was Harry. But you know that, Emma's uncle. The first man in my life. He was sixty, I think. How I adored him. I would have done anything in the world for him because he worked me until my voice poured like rich batter. At the same time, I had no life, no life at all. And I hated him for that. When other young girls held hands with boys and got invited to the movies, I was training. If you think I work you, it's nothing, nothing to what Harry put

me through. It was Harry who readied me for the conservatory. And when the day came, he had to take me by the hand, I was so frightened. I was convinced that when I opened my mouth, nothing would come out."

"You?" Nicole said, unbelieving. "*You* felt that?"

"For years. I never got over it completely. Always before a performance I had to hypnotize myself, pretend that Harry had me by the hand . . . and I had other devices." She paused. "You think, my dear, that I am your teacher, oh, no, you are mine." She put an arm around Nicole. As though that were not reward enough, Benedickta promised to take her to San Francisco for the opening of *Norma.*

It was an impulse that cost wakeful nights. It had been a year since she had appeared in public. She could not bear former colleagues gloating over her troll's cackle. Although she was managing better now, speaking in a lower key. The voice emerged a husky monotone. Still, it would be an ordeal. But she could not shut herself away from the world forever. Especially now that she had undertaken Nicole's training. And *Norma* was part of that training.

As she predicted, there was a rustle in the dress circle when she entered. People strained for a glimpse of her. She took her seat, composed, waiting for the houselights to dim. The first notes of the overture released her from scrutiny; she became oblivious to whispers and craning necks. Norma tugged at her senses. Only the life of the music held reality. She believed passionately in that vibrant world. It belonged to her. She had made it hers. There she was—the Druid priestess.

Nicole stole a look at the woman beside her and caught her breath sharply. It was another person. The veneer stripped—the eyes sucked in the scene, the lips formed Italian vowels, the throat arched and the flush of life overlay her face. She was breathing as though from the other's body. But the notes from the stage refused to soar and Benedickta's face clamped into a glaze. She could take no satisfaction from an inferior portrayal, it wrenched her to hear a falsely accented line or wrong tempo. The artist in her suffered when the sound failed to reach its ultimate.

Benedickta did not comment on the performance. She bowed and smiled her way through a bevy of friends and colleagues, stopping to introduce Nicole. "My pupil."

On the way back to the airport Benedickta behaved as if she

were alone in the cab. Actually she was running through the part, rephrasing it as it should have been.

She was jolted by Nicole saying, "I saw the movie three times. You were the greatest Norma ever. But tonight was a wonderful experience. There's nothing like a live performance. Thank you. I'll never forget hearing *Norma.*"

"You haven't heard *Norma,*" Benedickta growled in her gravel guttural subvoice.

The past reached out a tentative paw. Strange about the past, rarely was it over and done with. It arrived one day in a short note from Jeff.

Dear Benedickta,

This is an impulse because we are in the same city. I read that you had flown from Los Angeles to attend the opening of *Norma*, and I was able to track you down. Perhaps it is not convenient for you to see me.

I've been living out of the country, India mostly. But my job is once again done, and I have been offered an academic post at UCLA, which I look forward to. I hope that we can meet.

As always,
*Jeff*

She had waited for this note and it had not come. She had been open to receive it. A word from Jeff at that time, just a word . . .

But Jeff was in India, setting up remote agrarian stations. The insinuating paw continued to poke, with spread claws, to worry and tear. She recalled so many things, remembered a dozen minutiae —how partial he was to Carl Sandburg and that she had learned some of the folk songs to please him. His favorite quote came back to her: "There is only one man, and his name is Mankind."

Loving Jeff Hartley, she reflected, had been the best thing to

happen to her outside of music. Those short months with him gave her the first companionship since Mark. She had from the first been aware of a certain vulnerability in him. He awakened a kind of protectiveness, the sort other people felt toward her: Harry, Emma and, of course, Mark. The world outside barely touched him except as a problem in nutritive values. He knew nothing about people. Music for him was relaxation, a way of letting go. He enjoyed it without understanding it. "Might as well take a tranquilizer," she scolded him, "a downer or an upper." He made no pretense with her. And for this honesty she loved him.

It never occurred to her that he did not know what had happened. She thought the entire world knew of the growth in her throat. News services everywhere carried the story, followed the operation, awaited the outcome and wrote epitaphs. But thinking of it now, tasting the scrub and sand of the first Mexican station, she remembered it was work from which he forgot to look up. No papers were delivered in any language, only technical journals.

The fact that he didn't know started the clawing, the tearing. The hemorrhaging began when she was able to put a name to it—regret. Jeff and Benedickta, she had thrown them away.

Perhaps he'll think I got what I deserved. Did she deserve it? Who knows how much hell one is expected to take?

She went through the day like a somnambulist. The claws retracted, but they had done their job. She reread his note. What did "As always" mean? She decided it was simply a conventional ending.

She asked herself if she could endure the turmoil she had experienced all day. Did she want that now that her life was ordered, neat and, to an extent, filled? On the other hand, *No* was a period to herself as a woman. *No* was an admission that she had no right to a personal life, that she feared and dreaded it.

He only asked to come see me, she reminded herself. Perhaps the years had drained away what had been. Perhaps they would look on each other as strangers and from that meeting pass untouched to their respective lives. Or it might be . . .

"Benedickta." His voice claimed her.

She had been careful to have both Emma and Nicole present. Emma reached up and kissed his cheek. Benedickta remembered how fond she'd been of Jeff. "And this young lady . . ."

Jeff ignored her strange monotone and exclaimed, "Not the child you had in a Swiss boarding school?"

Nicole flushed at being referred to as a child. She had been very curious about this ex-husband, and pumped Emma regarding him as much as she dared. Benedickta was saying, "Suddenly you feel time go by with a roar of jets. We were going to have her join us, remember?"

"I remember."

There was a pause which none of them knew how to fill.

Jeff said, "No one ever believes I was once married to Benedickta Roland." He took her arm, moving her away from the others. "Of course I don't tell many people."

"Why not?"

"Because then I'd have to tell them what happened and I don't know."

"But you do, Jeff."

"Do I?"

"Let's start somewhere else. I'll ask you about FPC."

"FPC? What do you know about that?"

"What it stands for, fish protein concentrate. That it yields eighty percent protein. With as little as five percent added to cereal, it boosts the levels to that of animal protein."

He was astounded, but Benedickta only laughed the low laugh she had taught herself. "I happened to see an article with your name on it. It was in the dentist's office, I think."

"It's what I'm working on now. It has enormous potential."

"You haven't changed, Jeff . . . unless you have a secret life you haven't brought along."

"Like a Mrs. Hartley? We had this conversation before, but the answer is the same. No. I think when you left I took a good look at the life I expected someone to share. It was pretty scruffy."

"It wasn't. It wasn't scruffy at all."

"Well, let's just say it wasn't Malibu. Look at all this!" He made a wide gesture toward the sea that was sheathed in silver. "It's where you belong, some place like this."

"Once perhaps. I suppose you've noticed I'm not the same Benedickta. I didn't know if I should let you see me or hear me—but I put aside pride for once."

"When I was back in the States, I read about it, of course. But

you handle your voice better than I expected. And what you've gone through, well, it doesn't show."

"Hell and purgatory not show? Tell me about India, Jeff. It must have been exotic."

"Flies, dirt and heat."

"You left out one word," she said, reading him, "wonderful."

"We did develop this fish meal by solvent extraction."

"You really are the same Jeff, you really are."

He took to dropping by every day as though it was the natural thing to do. Benedickta found she was more relaxed. For one thing she was sleeping better. She did not wake immediately to her loss. Most mornings she woke thinking of Jeff. Laughingly she chased him from the music room when it was time for a lesson. Emma welcomed him like a son and packed picnics as she had in Valle de Bravo. These were eaten on the beach, Nicole joining them for a jog along the sand. Or a cold supper was served on the patio to which Jeff brought his special talent for tortilla making. He loved demonstrating his culinary skills. He showed Emma how to prepare a sweet curry flavored with cinnamon heaped liberally on rice balls. Nicole did justice to this. He was also good with a wok, not the plug-in kind, but an authentic skillet into which he chopped vegetables. "You see how well we're eating? All these meals are high in protein. Yet no grain-fed beef. That is the most wasteful and unnecessary of all eating habits."

"Jeff, you carry your podium with you." Benedickta laughed.

"I guess I do. I didn't mean to lecture at you."

"Oh," Nicole broke in, "but it's so important."

"You see, you have a disciple already. When did you say your classes at the university start?"

"My darling Benedickta, you never do listen. They started weeks ago."

"It's true, things don't seem to happen chromatically for me, but in chords. So how is the chord of your teaching?"

"I like it. It's a great way to organize things in my mind. And I've a lot of converting to do."

"Well, you've made a good start right here with the three of us." Benedickta flashed him the smile that had won audience after audience. It seemed to her, gathered about her was something she'd never had—a family, sitting around, talking, enjoying one another.

She was glad when Jeff mentioned that the house on Fire Island was not sold. How narrow to think that only in music was there life. Life was all around for the taking. You only had to reach out.

She put her hand on his arm as he was leaving and whispered, "Stay." At first she had tried to explain the effect Jeff had on her by telling herself it was like old times, having him around. But she knew it was more than that. He spoke of their days in Mexico unselfconsciously. He assumed she had left him for her career and that she had been justified. He assumed they were special to each other as they had always been. And he was right.

Emma had retired. Taking his hand, she led him up the stairs. They were careful as they passed Nicole's room but the television was going full blast. They grinned at each other like conspirators. Two grown-up people, who had been married to each other, sneaking past a youngster!

When the carved door closed behind them she threw herself into his arms. "Oh, Jeff, it's so good. Your being here is so good."

He kissed each eye before seeking her lips. They opened to his. "I won't hurt you a second time, Jeff," she murmured.

"Shhh . . ."

"No, I've thought about it. I've thought about it a good deal."

He lifted her to the bed.

"Let's not put on a light," she said. To her Jeff had not changed. But she knew she was not the girl who jumped onto Guapa and dashed over Mexico's northern highlands. Yet for tonight she wanted to be. She wanted the illusion that it was Valle de Bravo; that she had never left.

A double lifetime separated them. But when his arms went around her, she was home. Her body throbbed with his. Life entered her. Did she really leave Jeff all those years ago to laugh and cry on cue? To live make-believe and pretend lives, when she could have lived for him and for herself?

Jeff, like a greedy, sated child, lay at her side. They shared a new tranquillity, a new certainty. The questions she pondered had been answered. Was there a Benedickta Roland? Yes, oh, yes! A person, who even now could bring fulfillment to someone else. Not someone else—to Jeff. She smiled gently down at him. Even in his sleep he clutched her.

* * *

"Nedda's aria! That's what you'll sing, 'Stridono lassù.' It's perfect for you. We'll have a soiree like in the old days! You remember how I held forth! Or were you too young? You passed around the guest book for everyone to sign. But now it will be *you*, Nicole. I shall give you my name, Roland. Because you are descended from me by every note you sing. It was my first husband, Wolf, who explained this to me." She had almost said, "your father." "He believed the line of descent of an artist to be terribly important. At first I thought he meant the thinning, paling aristocracy of Europe, but he laughed at that as so much cattle breeding, so-and-so out of so-and-so. However, in the arts descent matters. You descend from me, and I from Bernard, from Margarita, from Harry and Madame and my natural mother. She named me, just as I name you."

"Yes, yes, I see. But I would never dare use the name Roland. They would laugh at me."

"No one will laugh," Benedickta said.

"And you don't mean a soiree where I sing? I couldn't. I'm not ready."

The camaraderie was over, an icy quality prevailed. "If I say you are ready, Nicole, you are ready."

"But I didn't give the B flat full count."

"Nicole, I did not say you were ready for the Metropolitan. In two weeks I am giving a small concert here in my own home to which a few intimate friends will be invited, and at which you, my pupil, will sing 'Stridono lassù' from *I Pagliacci*. Key, F-sharp major." Benedickta banged down the top of the piano. The discussion was terminated.

"Jeff," she said at dinner that evening, "I am sending you into exile."

"What?" he asked.

"That's right, exile. We can't get anything done with you here to tempt us: a ride, a sail, tennis. I realize Nicole's backhand has improved but—No, for two whole entire weeks, it is to be nothing but work."

"You mean what I have been witnessing and hearing is not work?"

"Nicole thinks so. But let me tell you, she doesn't know the meaning of the word." And she disclosed her plans.

"A soiree—that sounds elegant. And what do you think of the prospect, Nicole?"

Benedickta answered for her. "She thinks she is not ready, of course. Every young artist thinks that. But I have made the decision."

"You're serious? I can't come around for two weeks?"

"I'll call you every night."

He appealed to Emma, "Do you hear that? My crime seems to be that I make a good brandy Alexander. For that I am to be banished."

Emma was indignant and Nicole put in a timorous word for him, claiming he was not really a distraction.

"You're making things worse," he teased her. "I distract every female I come in contact with. Isn't that right, Emma?"

"That's right," Benedickta answered.

She drew a line around the date on her calendar. The day *after* did not exist for her. The world could explode into cinders, the seas boil with atomic detonations, or she herself slide into oblivion. But none of these things could happen until after May 26. There was no May 27. Except where Jeff was concerned. Although she was secretly glad of the hiatus. It was impossible to think about him when he was here. And she must think about him. He represented the future. A future she was sure of when they were together. But which dissolved once she was alone. What she felt for him was unwavering. It was herself she distrusted. Had she been used up? Perhaps she had never existed except as a singer. She didn't want to think that. She wanted . . .

Preparation for the recital translated into hours past anything Nicole thought she could endure. Exhausted, she was asked to trill more lightly. When she was feeling faint, Benedickta demanded *largamente;* a heightened *con impetuosità* when she had to grip the piano to keep from falling to the floor. At night Emma brought her hot cocoa. She fell asleep before she could finish it.

She remembered the first day when Benedickta had proposed teaching her, she had asked, "Are you strong? Physically strong?"

She replied, "Yes."

But this was impossible. It would kill her, no human being could survive it. Benedickta was now working on the build of mood, of attitude, of feeling. Nicole, who had never had an acting lesson in her life, was expected to emote like a Bernhardt.

"It is false," Benedickta wailed. "Oh, my God, it is high school dramatics. It must come from inside. You have an inside, don't you? An interior self?"

Nicole was suffering in those exact spots, why wasn't it heard? Why didn't it come across? She'd never get it right, never. Despair rang in her voice.

"That's it! That's it!" Benedickta pounced on the emotion. "Now you have it. The next step is to camouflage it."

"What?" Nicole cried.

"Absolutely. It is not *you* who must feel sorry for yourself, it is the audience. If you give way so totally, they will despise you. But they know your dream is delusion, that you will never go with Silvio. Let them fear for you, feel for you, weep for you, and give you a dozen curtain calls."

Nicole crumpled. "No one ever told me I'd have to be the greatest actress in the world as well."

"What do you think, that there are compartments; sing here, move there, act somewhere else? No, it is all one. One expression."

The tears, the frustration, the feeling of being driven past her capacity, beyond her talent and physical strength, all this was bottled up and saved for Emma. "What does she expect of me? It's crazy. *She* could do it, yes, all right. But it's unfair, unreasonable to expect it of me. I can't do anything right. I'm worse than I was last week. I'm so tired, all I want to do is die."

"First have a nice hot tub," Emma suggested.

When she had soaked off some of the weariness, she was wrapped in a fluffy monogrammed towel. She stared at the initials, *B. R.*

Jeff didn't wait for her to call. He called. "How's it going?" he asked.

"Rotten." Nicole had picked up the phone downstairs.

"Nicole!" Benedickta said. "Get off the extension. —It's going as expected. Everyone's edgy. But that's what makes a good performance."

"Is Nicole on the line?"

"No. I heard the click."

"Then let me ask, I'll only ask it once. Do you think you're building too much on this? Do you really think Nicole is another Benedickta?"

"Of course she isn't and I don't think it. But she's a talented girl. She'll go far."

"As long as you haven't set your sights too high. I don't want either of you disappointed. The papers got hold of it, you know. They're turning your soiree into something really big."

"Good."

"Is it true that Madame Cecily is coming?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope it works out. How are you, Benedickta?"

"I'm fine. How's Siberia?"

"Cold."

She laughed as she hung up, but mention of the press disturbed her. Everything she did was news and they were turning what had been a modest recital in her own home into a three-ring circus. The whole thing had grown, so that now if she left anyone out they would be offended. Her list of guests was alarmingly swollen.

She considered carefully before inviting Wolfgang Menetz. She had brought Nicole a long way, but had not been able to supply that keen edge of passion. Perhaps performing before an audience would do it, but it was just as apt to have the effect of freezing her. It was a tradition in theater that shock therapy frequently put that wild freedom into the voice. This had happened with her when Harry was dying and Madame made her play out her contract. Her own suffering entered the role. As the Puritan maid she poured out her distraction. Benedickta no longer hesitated. Being introduced to her father would heighten and fine-tune Nicole's emotions, adding the needed brilliance. She recognized the risk, but—with a flourish she addressed the envelope.

The night before the soiree she could not sleep. She groped for her robe and, getting up, went downstairs to make herself a cup of chocolate.

There was a light in the kitchen. Nicole, on a similar mission, stood before the refrigerator, surveying its contents. She started guiltily when Benedickta came in.

"What a good idea," Benedickta said. "Are there any cold cuts?"

"There's some cheese."

This was an item strictly forbidden. "You know what they say, golden in the morning, silver at noon, lead at night. Let's have some."

Nicole laughed somewhat uncertainly.

"I know why you're up," Benedicka told her. "But you mustn't be nervous. You're singing at home, in the same old room with the same old teacher. Just like always, right? So what can happen? But when you go out into the world, and leave this house, my God, you must be prepared for all kinds of catastrophes. Then things *do* happen that you can't believe. I was opening at La Scala and the first violinist was dead drunk. I had a duet with him, and *nothing*, absolute silence. So I started without him. But I didn't sing the score, I sang his name. I hit a perfect, rounded E and turned the phrase into 'Giacomo Nastri! Giacomo Nastri!' On the third Giacomo, it suddenly struck him and he drew his bow."

"I'd never be able to do anything like that. I wouldn't have the presence of mind."

"It's experience, keeping the show rolling no matter what. It becomes second nature."

"So much more than singing is involved."

"But of course," Benedickta agreed, munching with enjoyment. "The soiree is going to be a huge success. I know it."

For the first time Nicole's hostility broke through. "And what if it isn't?"

Benedickta looked at her thoughtfully.

"And what if it *is*?" Nicole continued. "Successful, I mean. . . . Why should I tear myself up for a roomful of strangers? That's what an audience is—strangers. They go home to lives. I want a life too—for myself. Like a member of the audience. Don't you envy them? Well, don't you?"

Benedickta walked up and slapped her. It was a hard openhanded slap.

No one who received an invitation declined. It was the social event of the musical season. Guests flew in from the East Coast and from Europe. Of course they came out of curiosity with no interest in her pupil. It was *her* face they would look into for signs of Hades and glimpses of the netherworld. However, Benedickta had not sung *Tosca* for nothing. She knew how to dissemble, to glow—in a low key, it is true. Although the voice remained muted, she inspired the same awe and reverence. It is difficult to build an image, but almost impossible to shatter it. Singing or not singing, she was Benedickta Roland. She stared intently at herself in the mirror as she sometimes did when entering a role. All internal ravages were carefully

erased.

To Nicole she seemed to palpitate with kinetic energy from which she herself caught fire. She would sing her best because she must. Her own terror was nothing to the will for success Benedickta infused in her.

"It is time," Benedickta announced. "Remember, I don't want you to be good tonight. Anyone can be good. Good is shit. You must be superb."

"I will try."

"You will do it. I gave you my name."

They descended the curved staircase arm in arm. Nicole was to stand beside her and greet the guests. The room was softly lighted by candles in Mexican gourds, hollowed out and hung in clusters from the ceiling.

Everyone who entered the Malibu hacienda that night felt the heightened atmosphere and excitement that marked a Benedickta Roland performance. She was gracious, assured, accepting a kiss on both cheeks and a lingering one over her hand bestowed by Wolfgang Menetz.

"Wolf," she said casually as planned, "I want you to meet my protégée." She withheld the name, but only for a moment. "It's Nicole," she said with an emphasis that caused Nicole to give her a puzzled glance.

"Yes, yes, your father. Why do you think I was so confident of you? Because you are a *Menetz*. Music was born in you the way it was in me. Don't you see. . . ." The last sentence was uttered as a plea, for Nicole looked as though she would drop where she stood.

It was Wolf who rallied and saved the situation by kissing Nicole on the cheek. "We must both be grateful to Benedickta. You are lovely, Nicole. I'm very proud. And I have every confidence you will make me prouder still."

"I can't believe . . . I never dreamed . . ."

"When I gave you into Benedickta's keeping, I knew I was doing the right thing. It was a sacrifice, of course. . . ."

Benedickta had other guests to greet, she didn't hear more. But she'd heard enough. The old fox, she knew she could count on his unfailing charm. There was no doubt that Nicole was charmed—and thrilled. Her gamble had worked.

She was glad Jeff had not come in the main press. Cars were still pulling up outside, but the party was under way; servants moved

among the guests with silver trays, and at the bar a champagne fountain flowed. Strings and a piano played from the balcony.

"Is my banishment ended?" It was Jeff, smiling at her side.

She pressed his arm. "Thank goodness you're here."

"Are you nervous? You?"

"You are watching Benedickta Roland give her finest performance."

"Well, you could fool me."

"Yes," she said simply. Fooling Jeff had never been that difficult. Or had it been herself she had fooled? She didn't know. He threw her off balance. She said things she didn't mean to say, felt things she didn't mean to feel. . . . "Will you have a glass of champagne?"

"No Benedickta, I won't be another guest. Especially not tonight."

They were broken in on. "Benedickta, my darling." It was Madame Cecily, looking as if she had been taken from a Toulouse-Lautrec poster, who embraced her. "What have you been up to? I must know."

"Excuse me, Madame, this is Jeff Hartley."

Jeff acknowledged the introduction and moved awkwardly away. She reached out and touched his hand briefly. "Jeff, we'll talk later." Madame kept close beside her, filling her in on the latest gossip, as she threaded her way among the people she had assembled, stopping again and again.

"There has always been a strong Mozart cult in France, wouldn't you agree, Benedickta?"

"Of course."

. . . "I tell you the Met is an arena these days."

. . . "I'm always at the Plaza from November to May."

. . . "I couldn't bring myself to vote for him. There's something wrong with a man who wears vests."

Words breaking about her. Once she had passed by, the whispers . . . "Not a note. It's pitiful."

She was about to parry such remarks and her foil was Nicole. Madame squeezed her hand for luck and Benedickta climbed to the balcony, where Nicole was waiting. She took her stand by the nine-foot Baldwin. Nicole's eyes were on her and she nodded imperceptibly. Then, leaning over the piano, she struck a chord.

The room of musicians became attentive, straining to hear the low words. "We are here tonight to launch a young talent it has

been my pleasure to guide. An artist who has done me the honor to take my name. Nicole Roland will sing Nedda's aria, 'Stridono lassù,' from *I Pagliacci* by Leoncavallo."

Stillness settled. A well-placed opening measure. The tessitura was not that of a Benedickta, but there were moments when the phrasing recalled what had been lost. Some present remembered Benedickta at the recital in which Wolfgang Menetz presented her. She had been this girl's age, but the quality of her voice had touched each person there. Sometimes too strident, not always perfectly controlled, but commanding, passionate past enduring . . . Tonight they heard a skilled rendition, a technically proficient performance.

Benedickta listened, impassive. She had taught well, but the ploy with Menetz had not worked. The soul, the soul cannot be transmuted. Her special ability of feeling her way into the music, of bringing life to it, could not be shared. She had turned out an accomplished singer, no more.

The evening was what everyone expected. She, who had performed so many miracles, had hoped for one more. It had not happened.

The aria was finished, the guests crowded around. "She did it beautifully," Madame said, and in the next breath mentioned she was due back in Verona.

"An extremely talented protégée. She has great potential." What memories that word evoked. Nevertheless, Benedickta smiled, discussed the texture of the middle register, the flowing disinvolture.

A producer of an eastern company pressed her hand. "As I heard this young woman, it occurred to me your services would be incredibly important to us. Have you considered becoming involved in directing?"

"I hadn't." She was already searching for Jeff.

There he was in a corner of the room. "Well, what did you think?" she asked, coming up to him.

"She was charming. Of course I'm no authority on voices, but I don't imagine she's another Benedickta."

"That's the first honest summation I've heard. Thanks, Jeff. I can be an excellent coach. I cannot perform miracles."

"Weren't you pleased with her performance?"

"She did very well."

"Poor Nicole." Then Jeff focused on her. "What about you, are you okay?"

Benedickta nodded. She had sung each word, flown with the birds, those bohemians of the sky . . . dreamed with Nedda. She took a large sip of champagne. She thought she was past this. She thought herself resigned. I am, I am resigned. She smiled into Jeff's face. "At all the crucial moments you are here."

"It does seem like that, doesn't it?" They had moved to the terrace, but it was crowded there too. Benedickta led him along the path by the Moorish wall, past an arch through which you stepped to see the surf roll up. She took his hand and they were on the other side.

Wolfgang had followed them. He was panting with the exertion of the climb and with fury. "You did this to get even with me," he bellowed. "The girl is no more a singer than I am. You made a fool of her before everyone."

Benedickta was truly horrified. "Wolf, I assure you . . ." A sound of utter misery stopped her, a series of wrenching sobs. Nicole was seated in the shadow.

She got up, stared at them blankly, while her mouth continued to emit a thin sustained mindless sound. She turned suddenly and plunged down the embankment through thick chaparral.

"I'll get her," Jeff said, and disappeared into the night.

"Well," Benedickta snapped at Menetz, "I hope you're satisfied."

"My God, how could I know she was there? This is terrible."

"And you happen to be wrong. She was nervous tonight. The girl is a talent. She will do well. Oh, what does it matter? Just follow this path, Wolf. It leads around by the kitchen and out the back way."

"Front way, back way, as long as I escape that terrible rasp of yours. In spite of everything, I pity you. I do, I pity you."

It took awhile for her pulse to return to normal. Benedickta strained to see into the canyon. There was no sign of Jeff or Nicole. She had confidence that Jeff would find her, probably he already had. She depended on his good sense to put things in proportion. Nicole was young. For her there was plenty of time.

She stared a moment more into the dark tarn before returning to the house. An hour later a calm and poised Nicole was moving among the guests. Jeff smiled from across the room. She didn't know how he had done it, but all was well. Champagne still flowed from the golden fountain.

The debris of the party was cleared away. The servants hired for the occasion had left. Emma had retired hours ago. Benedickta prowled about aimlessly, going over her conversation with Nicole. It was unsatisfying, brief and strange. Benedickta remembered the guilt and embarrassment with which she had approached her. "It wasn't anything like what your father said, Nicole. It's because he *is* your father that he expected . . ."

Nicole stopped her. "It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

Nicole seemed detached, not like Nicole at all. "I came to the same conclusion," she said, "I did passably well. I didn't disgrace you."

"And that's what you were afraid of? Oh, Nicole." She tried to embrace the girl, but now it was Nicole who pulled away.

"We settled our relationship a long time ago. I can do without your acting, Benedickta. Or perhaps you don't know you're acting?" The girl laughed shortly and unpleasantly. "Everything you do is acting. Don't you know that?" She did not go upstairs, but left by the front door as though she had been a guest.

Perhaps she had been a guest. And perhaps every word she said was true. Teacher! Had it simply been another role into which to fling herself? She had believed—but then she believed all her parts.

Benedickta went up to her room. but not to bed. Why would she never listen? If only she had listened. Nicole tried to tell her she was not ready. Even Emma begged her not to trifle with the girl. She remembered slapping Nicole. But she had done worse to her, much worse. Nicole was right to leave her. Jeff also had attempted to intervene, and been thrust aside. She winced, thinking of Wolf's vindictive tirade. She didn't deserve Nicole, she didn't de-

serve any pupil. She, with her ghastly certainty. Always knowing best, even bringing Madame from Italy. I am mad, she thought, if madness is the inability to distinguish the possible from the impossible.

And how high-handed she had been with Jeff. It hadn't been *he* who was banished. The two weeks had been exile for her. She was exiled from his voice, his laugh, the sight and touch of him. She had grown so lonely for him that several times she had driven by his Westwood apartment. He was the one thing she could hold on to. Her voice was gone, she was a failure as a teacher, her instincts had proved wrong, she had hurt Nicole—Benedickta felt as if the ground under her feet were falling away. She needed Jeff, needed to be beside him on his bougainvillea-draped balcony.

She undressed, showered and dressed again with care. She took time with her makeup, applying the faint scent Jeff liked. The oval mirror with its Mexican frame that he had bought her in Valle de Bravo showed a beautiful woman with dark wonderful eyes who had the appearance of serenity.

She drove a small Mazda. The coast highway rimmed the sea with a chain of lights. She sped along it. Jeff, like Mark, had proved himself. He had waited for her twice. And she would prove herself . . . make him happy the way she used to, the way she had. She parked without caring the curb was painted green, and ran up the stairs. She pressed the bell, leaning against the door.

He must be asleep. Of course he'd be asleep. She smiled, thinking how rough and rumpled his hair would be, imagining his eyes change as he realized she was here. In another moment he would put his arms around her and say sleepily, "I could have made that drive from Malibu a hell of a lot faster."

She could hear him fumbling with the lock. The door opened. She was facing Nicole, who had thrown on one of her robes. It was monogrammed *B. R.* She stared first into Nicole's face, then at the stitchery.

Jeff, annoyance in his voice, called, "Who is it at this hour?"

"Someone has the wrong apartment," Nicole said, and shut the door.

Benedickta walked back to the car and swung it in an arc. There was no dimension to anything. People were flat like paper dolls, time was something one could drive through.

It wasn't until she pulled into her own driveway that she started

to laugh. She did this silently, holding to the steering wheel. Several large breaths and she was able to get out and negotiate the stairs. She had left the front door unlocked. Some of the pills were on this floor. She emptied them into her purse. Then she climbed, half hauling herself up the staircase. There was another bottle in her bureau with her makeup. Systematically she added its contents to the others. The rest were in her bathroom.

She had left a night-light on and as she entered Mark barred her way. He stood before her, looking at her sternly. —No, Mark. You're not here. You're dead. He didn't listen to her. Mark didn't know he was dead. He came toward her. He raised his arm to touch her.

Benedickta screamed and kept on screaming. She was falling through time that bent like a parabola. Her diaphragm heaved and there was deep tearing in her throat. Like a hymen, layers of tissue were stripped from it, until the screaming changed from raucous croak to a clear high sound.

She broke off, holding her breath, afraid to utter a syllable. There was a pounding in her body, veins swelled, her face suffused. "Mark." She spoke his name in an ordinary tone. She saw now he had been a reflection of herself in the dim light. But the current, absent so long, was there in the room. JKKE FORSTYRRES, he had finally taken down the sign.

That scream, that unreasoned scream, and his name said clearly seconds later. She held both in memory as though in her hands, turning gently, analyzing texture and lucidity. Her lips parted.

If even one note was there it was enough. It was the first block by which she would rebuild Benedickta Roland. She went to the window and flung it open. The night was dark, like an auditorium. Into that void she sent her voice. . . .

She grabbed hold of the drapes to keep from falling. They ripped, but she continued to clutch them. The sound thrown at the night was perfect.

She let go of the drape. She pressed her hand into her groin against the sharp blade of the tattoo. Everything was cut away and everyone. Mark had imparted his last secret. She had known it all along, accepting the brand on her body, but planning to cheat, just as Benka had.

Now, with absolute resolution, with joy even, she put all that was not music behind her. To sing as no man or woman could sing, the castrato must call for the knife.

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Freedman, Nancy Mars.
Prima Donna :

(continued from front flap)
love of her older brother, Mark. The novel chronicles Benedickta's brilliant rise from an orphaned waif, discovered by a gentle church organist, through the years of training and struggle, to prima donna, the reigning star of La Scala and the Met, the toast of Milan, Rome, London and New York.

Here is a woman so glorious her fans call her la divina, so dazzling men long to possess her. But behind the scenes of the voluptuous operatic world, we see a different Benedickta: a vulnerable woman mourning a death, suffering the pain of leaving the man she loves, torn between her demanding music and her equally demanding heart.

Benedickta's affair with one of the world's most successful men leads her to a shattering and unexpected realization—as Freedman keeps the reader riveted to the last hypnotic page.

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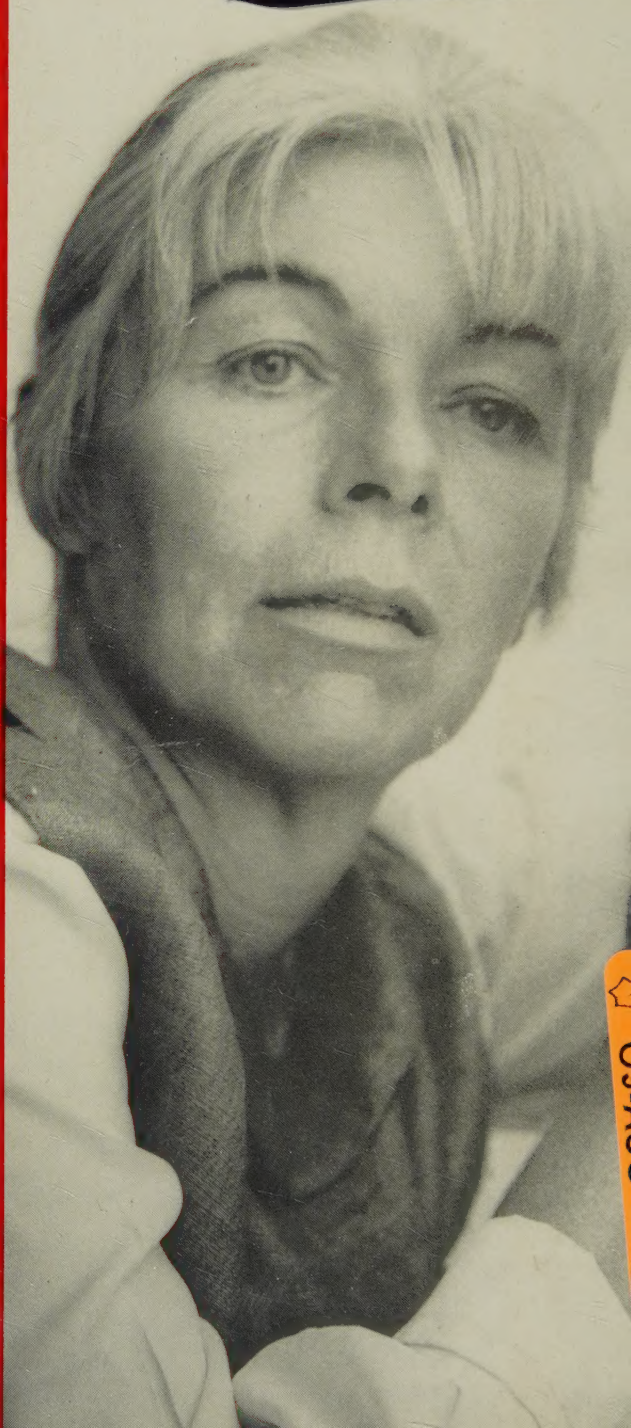
The daughter of a newspaperwoman and a surgeon, Nancy Freedman was raised by her maternal Anglo-Irish grandmother, who was responsible for the large part music has played in her life. Nancy married a mathematician; together they raised three children on five continents and wrote **Mrs. Mike,** long recognized as an American classic and made into a major motion picture. Nancy Freedman is also the author of **Joshua Son of None** and **The Immortals,** both recent best sellers. Boston University has established a collection of her manuscripts, journals and correspondence. The Freedmans live in Malibu, California.

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